

Chapter 1

The Next Day

It's over.

This was the first thought to come to Harry's mind upon waking from what seemed like his longest sleep ever. It's finally over, he thought. He looked around the room that Sirius used to sleep in, and for some reason he felt more out of place than he had ever felt there. The pictures and banners that had so annoyed Sirius's parents reflected agreeable sentiments, but they weren't his. It only seemed to emphasize that he had never really had a home. Hogwarts had been the closest thing to it, and there was the Burrow, but there had been no place that he knew was his, and always would be.

What am I going to do now?

He wanted to banish the thought as soon as he had it. I'm not going to think about that right now, he answered himself. He felt as though he wanted to sleep more, but he knew he had already slept far more than long enough.

He'd originally intended to sleep in his Gryffindor dormitory in the late morning after Voldemort's defeat; after talking to Dumbledore's portrait, he decided not to put the Cloak back on to walk through the castle. After all, he couldn't constantly walk around wearing it. However, after being intercepted by more than a dozen students on the way, he decided he would never get enough peace to sleep, and went to Grimmauld Place instead. He had felt as though celebrating was in order, but he had been too tired to celebrate, and too sad about the losses they had suffered. Now, however, he felt a wave of elation as it dawned on him for the first time that his scar would never hurt again. Somehow that seemed more important than the fact that wizarding society would be free of Voldemort's influence. Even though he knew it was a selfish thing to think, he couldn't help feeling it.

Yet despite the happiness, there was an unease, a feeling of things not being right, as if the mildest possible form of a dementor hovered

over him. He could think of no reason for it. He was still pained at the thought of the deaths of Remus, Tonks, and Fred, but this was different from that. Somehow he didn't belong. He tried not to focus on this thought either. You've been through a lot, he told himself; maybe it'll just take some time to get used to things. He had, after all, not slept in a proper bed for a very long time.

I'd better get up, he thought. Can't lie in bed all day.

After a trip to the bathroom, he headed down to the kitchen; his stomach reminded him that he hadn't eaten for quite a while. As he walked, he thought about whether he should summon Kreacher if he wasn't already there. He wondered how he felt about having a house-elf, especially that particular one. Kreacher had been of great service, but it was never far from Harry's mind that Kreacher had had no small part in Sirius's death. He then reminded himself again that Sirius had treated Kreacher quite badly, and he had learned from his own experience that house-elves responded well to kind treatment. Not that Sirius deserved to be betrayed, but maybe Dumbledore was right, that Sirius should have treated Kreacher better. As he entered the kitchen, it occurred to him that it was very ironic that in Harry's fourth year at Hogwarts, Sirius had said that it was the mark of a man how well he treated those lower than him, and yet with Kreacher, he had more or less failed his own test. Harry supposed that Sirius's antagonism toward Kreacher was one of habit, and habits were hard to break...

His train of thought derailed as he saw not Kreacher as he might have expected, but Kingsley Shacklebolt reaching into the refrigerator. "Kingsley?" he gasped.

"Morning, Harry," said Kingsley casually. "Food'll be ready in a bit. Sit down, I brought a Prophet. Few things in there about you. I know you don't like publicity, but at least it's better than it has been in the past." He busied himself cracking eggs into a bowl. Bacon and sausage were cooking on a grill, and a loaf of bread was on the counter. Stupefied, Harry found that his sense of being out of place had greatly increased.

He said the only thing he could think of. "What are you doing here?"

"Making breakfast," replied Kingsley, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for him to be doing. "Aren't you hungry?"

"Well, yes, but..." He felt mildly annoyed as he realized that Kingsley had diverted him from his point. "You know what I mean. Aren't you the Minister of Magic now?"

Kingsley tilted his head as if surprised that Harry had mentioned it. "Must be, I think it's in the Prophet there. Have a read. Oh, do you like onions in your omelets?"

"Um..." Still very disoriented, Harry took so long to answer that the next thing he noticed was Kingsley looking at him expectantly, indicating that he couldn't proceed with his cooking until he had Harry's answer. "Sure, OK." Kingsley nodded, and started chopping an onion.

Harry looked down at the Prophet. The large, bold headline read, 'Potter Victorious,' and the sub-headline, 'Defeats, Kills You-Know-Who.' Still mystified at what Kingsley was up to, the headline annoyed him enough to ignore it for a moment. "You-Know-Who?" he repeated aloud. "He's dead! They can't say his damn name even when he's dead?"

Kingsley chuckled in agreement. "I thought that too," he said, pouring the omelet mixture into a pan. "But you have to keep in mind that he died before, or so it seemed, but he came back. There are some people who aren't going to easily accept that he won't come back again."

"He's not coming back this time, trust me," muttered Harry as he scanned the article. At the bottom of the page, there was a small box with the words, "Is You-Know-Who Really Dead? See Article on Page 3." He shook his head in annoyance.

"And how do you know that?" asked Kingsley, still sounding casual. At his wand's behest, the omelet rose in the pan, flipped over, and floated down into the pan again.

Harry sighed lightly. "It's a long story."

"I may be the Minister now, but my time is your time. Coffee?"

"Yes, thanks. Is that why you came here? To find out about that?"

Kingsley shook his head as he caused a pot of coffee to tip over and pour its contents into a mug, which then floated to where Harry was sitting. "I wasn't thinking about that particularly, but it does seem like a good thing for people to know. It would be helpful if everyone had the same confidence in that as you do."

Harry glanced up at Kingsley, whose attention had returned to cooking. He could see Kingsley's point, but didn't feel like answering just then. He opened the paper, scanning headlines and parts of articles. "Hogwarts: Scene of the Final Battle," read one, with pictures of the damage to the castle. A few students were also pictured, including Neville, whom Harry noticed was mentioned prominently in the article.

There was silence as Harry read, until an omelet, toast, sausage, and bacon had converged on plates in front of Harry; Kingsley sat down in front of his own food. "Thanks," said Harry as he took a bite of the toast.

"Cooking's always been a little hobby of mine, partly out of necessity, being single." After another pause during which both worked on their food, Kingsley spoke again.

"Okay, now that I don't have to concentrate on cooking the food, I will actually answer some of your questions," he said, with an expression that was a mild apology for his earlier evasiveness. "I'm here to talk to you, as much for your sake as for mine. As for breakfast, it was just a humorous pretext, though in a way, the Minister of Magic preparing your breakfast is somehow appropriate symbolically, a gesture of thanks for all you've done."

"It's not as though you didn't do anything," Harry pointed out.

“True, and that’s why I’m now the Minister of Magic,” agreed Kingsley. “But you’re the one who killed Voldemort. As you may have noticed from the Prophet, you’re considered a hero, and that may be understating the case.”

Before Kingsley could continue, Harry muttered, “I don’t feel like a hero.”

“You probably do, actually. In heroic sagas, the hero is usually too worn out from what he’s done to really enjoy it. He just wants to live a normal life.” Kingsley seemed to be able to tell from Harry’s expression that Harry was surprised, as if Kingsley had read his mind.

“I thought everyone loved the hero, and he got married and lived happily ever after,” said Harry, suddenly thinking of Ginny. He then pushed the thought aside; that was something he couldn’t think about now, either.

“I should have said, good heroic sagas,” allowed Kingsley. “The more simplistic ones don’t take into account the toll that what he did takes on the hero. Life is always more complicated than ‘and they all lived happily ever after.’” The tone hadn’t changed, but Kingsley’s eyes revealed his concern.

“Anyway,” continued Kingsley after a few more bites of food, “Even apart from that, there will be aspects of this, both good and bad, that you need to understand. First of all, people are going to want a piece of you. I mean, to some extent, that’s always been the case, but it’ll be much more so now. Not only ordinary people who want to touch and thank Harry Potter, Defeater of Voldemort—” Having spoken the last five words in a humorously pompous way, Kingsley broke into a small grin at Harry’s annoyed expression, then continued, “You’ll hear stronger praise than that, so you’d better start getting used to it.

“As I was saying, not only that, but you’ll be an irresistible commodity to people who are looking out for their own interests, not yours. Kind of like Scrimgeour wanting you to do Ministry public relations for him, but much more. Especially politicians and businesspeople will want to be associated with you. Some inventor will accost you, show you or tell you about some idea he’s come up with, and ask you to be his

partner. He'll offer to make you a 50-50 partner with no investment from you, just your name on the product, or doing some promotion for it. And even if you say no, a comment like "That sounds nice" could be misrepresented in an ad. 'Endorsed by Harry Potter!'"

This lecture was doing nothing for Harry's mood. "Well, at least I have some experience with this kind of thing," he said resignedly.

"True, but especially since Voldemort came back, you've been more or less sheltered from it by your protection, the need to keep you safe. That's no longer an issue, though one thing I wanted to say was that far from every Death Eater is dead, and I've no doubt that they'd love to be the one to finish off the man who killed their leader. Not to mention that they, too, might hold out some hope that he could yet come back."

With a very sour expression, Harry responded, "So, not only do I have to be careful of Death Eaters who want to get back at me, but also of people who want to use me to get something for themselves." Kingsley nodded, with a 'sorry, but yes,' expression. "Great. Anything else I should watch out for?" Harry was beginning to feel that there was a reason that he didn't feel quite right.

"Actually, yes, but it's not all bad," Kingsley hastened to point out. "People will stop you in the street to thank you, tell you how appreciative they are—"

"That's a good thing?" Harry asked in disbelief. "That's also been happening all my life, well, since I came to Hogwarts, and I've never been all that thrilled with—"

"This is different, Harry," interrupted Kingsley sternly. "This time, you've really done something to deserve it."

Harry raised his eyebrows a little, as if it hadn't occurred to him that way. "I know how you feel about that," continued Kingsley. "But it really is different this time, and you need to take that into account. Before, you probably just looked at people as if they were a bit loopy, and I can understand why. But now, they're thrilled, excited. You killed their oppressor, helped set them free, especially the Muggle-

borns. You'll be a hero to everyone, but especially to them. You have to understand that. You don't have to sit down and have the drink with them that they'll offer to buy you, but you should just say thank you politely, and appreciate their enthusiasm. You do deserve that.

"Anyway, my main point was to make sure you recognized the pitfalls that you'll probably be facing. At least for a while, you'd do well to be suspicious of anyone who seems to want to be your friend who wasn't your friend before." With a small smile, he added, "Especially politicians."

That got a tiny smile out of Harry. "Like you."

"If you think I wanted this job, Harry, then you're not thinking very hard." He cut off Harry's incipient protest, adding, "I know you didn't think that, I was just joking. This is the last thing I ever wanted to do, but I'm stuck with it, at least for a while. While you were doing whatever it was you were doing, I was helping lead the resistance. Not that we were getting anywhere, but we had to try. So, I was the logical choice to be Minister; everyone who worked in the Ministry was tainted, by having worked in the former regime. Not that you were automatically a Death Eater if you did, but we're going to be spending some time working out who was a little too enthusiastic in cooperating with Thicknesse and his Death Eater controllers. The Minister had to be someone with totally clean hands."

"Did other Aurors help you?" asked Harry, suddenly curious. He realized that there were a lot of stories about the resistance that he didn't know, and would probably be hearing.

"Some, like Hestia and Tonks, of course, and a few others you don't know. But that's a problem too. Some Aurors cooperated with the old government more than I would have liked, so we have to decide what to do about that. It won't be easy, either with the Aurors, or with society in general."

Harry didn't react much to what Kingsley said. He could see what Kingsley meant—it seemed as though some people from seventeen years ago, like Lucius Malfoy, had been let off too lightly—but it didn't interest him much. "I guess I don't envy you."

“Nor do I,” agreed Kingsley. “Obviously this doesn’t involve you much, but it’s good for you to know what’s going on. The important thing to understand is that our society isn’t just going to continue on like nothing ever happened. It was damaged, and will take time to repair. If things don’t go well, it could get worse before it gets better. And I hate to say it, because I know how you’ll feel—“ Harry’s instant reaction to this was to think that nobody could know how he felt—“but there may be things you can do to help.”

Harry was now sure he understood. “And that’s why you’re here.”

“Don’t be so cynical, Harry. I made you breakfast, after all.” Kingsley regarded him with slightly raised eyebrows and understated humor. Saying nothing, Harry looked at Kingsley expectantly. “No, not really. Not as such. I’m here to make you aware of some things I think you should be aware of, and that is just one of them. But it would have been disingenuous of me to talk to you and not tell you that.”

“All right, Kingsley,” said Harry, a little more sharply than he meant to, “what is it you want me to do, for the good of society?”

Harry wasn’t sure, but thought he saw mild disappointment with his attitude in Kingsley’s eyes. “For now, nothing more than that you come to the Ministry sometime in the next week and accept an Order of Merlin, First Class.”

“Do I have to?”

Kingsley couldn’t help but chuckle; Harry realized that he probably sounded like a kid trying to beg off doing chores. “My, you are a hard sell. No, you don’t have to, but it wouldn’t look good if you didn’t. This is another thing you’re not going to like hearing, but it really is a serious thing: you are probably the most famous person in wizarding society right now, and you may well be all your life. You need to consider how the things you do will look. Turning down the government’s highest honor would not look good.”

Harry stared at his plate for a moment as he ate the last of his food. “Okay, I’ll do it. But I’m not going to live my life worrying about how

every last thing I do will look to people. I'm going to be who I am, and if they like me, that's fine, and if they don't, that's fine, too." He looked up at Kingsley defiantly.

"I wouldn't expect anything else of you," Kingsley said. "We've all seen how stubborn you can be. Look, you can feel free to ignore my advice. But I assure you that I have nothing but the best intentions in giving it to you."

Harry could tell that Kingsley was telling the truth, and was suddenly embarrassed by his own behavior. Not meeting Kingsley's eyes, he nodded his understanding.

Kingsley nodded as well. "I know it's been hard for you, Harry, and I do sympathize. I might sympathize more if it weren't for the fact that right now, I have it much worse than you do. Tell you what, how'd you like this job? You can have it right now, if you want it."

Kingsley grinned as Harry finally laughed a little. "No way!" The smile slowly faded as he thought about it. "I do get your point, and I agree you have it worse. I guess it just doesn't make me any happier with what you've told me."

Both had finished eating; Kingsley stood to collect the dishes and put them into the sink. "Understandable. So, where are you going to live? I suppose, here for the time being?"

Harry shrugged. "I've been asleep most of the time since I left Hogwarts, so—"

"You haven't even begun to think about that," finished Kingsley. "Sorry, should've known that. Well, you can look at it this way: whatever happens from now won't be as hard as what you've already done."

"From everything you've said, I'm not so sure," muttered Harry. "How about for you?"

"Oh, I was on the run for a while, and without the benefit of an Invisibility Cloak," he added with a grin, "but I think being Minister will

be a lot harder. Give me a few months, I'll be complaining to you about how hard my life is."

With a humorless chuckle, Harry nodded. "Then why did you accept the job?"

"As I said before, I was the perfect choice—" Kingsley cut himself off as he saw Harry about to interrupt. "Yes, I know, it sounds like I'm not answering the question, but I am. Maybe I can put it another way: society needed me to do what I did, until yesterday. Society needs me now, too, just in a different way." Kingsley looked at Harry significantly as he answered, and Harry clearly understood the unspoken words: society needs you, too.

Harry reflexively avoided addressing the topic. "Oh, don't bother with the dishes, I'll do them, or have Kreacher—where is he, come to think of it? Kreacher?" he shouted.

With the usual loud popping noise, Kreacher suddenly appeared a few feet in front of Harry. "Master! Master is awake—" He cut himself off as he looked, horrified, at the rest of the kitchen. "Master has not cooked!" He appeared scandalized. "Master must always call Kreacher for food!" His eyes were pleading, obviously hoping that Harry had not lowered himself to do jobs fit for house-elves.

"No, don't worry, Kreacher. Kingsley cooked me breakfast. He just came over and did it, when I woke up. How did you know when to come, anyway?"

"I came a few hours ago, and you were still sleeping. I did the usual wake-up sensor spell." Harry looked at him quizzically. "Hmmm, I guess they don't teach that at Hogwarts. I've always thought Hogwarts should have a home-economics course; there are a lot of useful household spells they don't teach there. You should ask Molly to teach you. You leave the spell on someone when they're sleeping, and you feel a kind of tapping in your head when they wake up."

"Ah." Noting Kreacher's confusion regarding Kingsley, Harry explained. "Kreacher, I'm sure you've seen Kingsley around here before. He's the Minister of Magic now."

Kreacher offered Kingsley a perfunctory bow before turning back to Harry. "Minister Kingsley cannot replace Kreacher!"

Harry and Kingsley both laughed. "No, I couldn't," agreed Kingsley. "Don't worry, Kreacher, I didn't plan to make a habit of it." Mumbling to himself, Kreacher shuffled toward the sink, conjured a tall stool, and started washing dishes, Summoning the pots and pans from their places on the stove.

"Well, I'll be getting back," said Kingsley. "Harry, I'll be saying this again next week when I give you the award, but thank you for what you did. I'd really like to hear the story sometime."

Harry nodded. "Good luck at the Ministry."

"I'll need it," responded Kingsley. He left the kitchen, and a few seconds later, Harry heard the familiar sound of the fireplace lighting up, and Kingsley saying, "Ministry, Atrium."

Harry leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes for a minute, trying not to think about anything in particular. He opened them and glanced at Kreacher washing the dishes. It felt strange to be in the house alone with Kreacher, though he supposed it might be that way, at least for a while. He knew that if he wanted to avoid Kreacher, he could; house-elves didn't usually make pests of themselves to their masters. He realized that a lot of things were going to seem strange from now on. Life had changed, and he would have to get used to it.

He didn't leave Grimmauld Place for the rest of the day, and somewhat to his surprise, he had no further visitors. He had wondered whether Ron or Hermione would visit, not that he had any particular desire for company. It had occurred to him that only Order members could visit him, since only they had been told of the secret in the proper way. Curious, he had asked Kreacher what had happened when Yaxley had appeared in the fireplace; Kreacher responded that he had touched Yaxley, Apparated him out, then quickly returned. No other Death Eaters, or any other unauthorized people, had returned to the house. Harry knew this meant that he alone, as the owner of the house, was the Secret-Keeper after

Dumbledore's death, and therefore Hermione's concerns had been groundless, and they could have lived in the comfort and safety of Grimmauld Place for all those months. He felt annoyance with Hermione for being overly cautious (and wrong, unusually for her), but he supposed in retrospect that being extra cautious had not been unreasonable.

The only other contact he had with the outside world was to notice several letters in a neat pile in a corner of the living room. Kreacher explained that this house, and most wizarding houses, had chutes on the roof that owls could drop letters into, and they would land in the same place. Harry had looked at a few; they were mostly letters thanking him and expressing admiration for his defeat of Voldemort. One of them brought his mood down; it was the official notice of the place and time of Fred's funeral. Well, at least I got one day's break, he thought, then was ashamed of himself for regarding going to a friend's funeral as an annoyance. It was not the funeral exactly, he knew; it was all the people who would be there, who he would be expected to talk to. He still wasn't sure why the idea disturbed him so much; he tried not to think about it as he lay in bed that night. After two hours of reading and trying to sleep, he finally succeeded.

"Haaaaarrrrrryyyyy...."

The voice was a whisper. Harry wasn't sure he had really heard it while he was drifting to consciousness, but now that he was awake, he was sure. "What?" he asked. "Who is this?"

"Haaaaarrrrrryyyyy...."

The voice sounded familiar, yet not enough for Harry to identify it. It was wispy and fragile, as if a gust of wind could blow it away. Fully awake now, Harry reached for the wand under his pillow. "Who's there?" he asked aggressively, pointing the wand around the room, ready for something to jump out.

He was facing away from the bed when he heard the voice behind him, now a more normal tone, though still a little different in tone from most voices, and more familiar. "Blimey, you're touchy." Harry spun around to see a ghost hovering over his bed, grinning at him.

Harry's mouth hung open. "Fred??"

"Can't a ghostie have a little fun without wands getting pointed at him?" asked Fred with mock surprise. "Yes, very good. I reckon one bad thing about my current situation is that no one's going to have trouble telling one from the other. Okay, the ear thing was a giveaway, but from an angle, there could have been some doubt. But now, you'd have to be incredibly thick... even the voice is different, isn't it?"

Still digesting this, Harry numbly nodded.

"Yeah, I'd always wondered why ghosts can even speak, for that matter," mused Fred. "I mean, we shouldn't be able to, should we, if we're insubstantial? Touch, taste, and smell don't work, but hearing, sight, and speaking do? What bloody sense does that make?" After a short pause, Fred continued, "Sorry, I do ramble. So, happy to see me? I assume you are, judging from your ebullient reaction and warm welcome." With slightly raised eyebrows, Fred waited for a response.

Harry was looking through Fred at the headboard of the bed, slowly recovering from his shock. "Sorry, it's just... the last thing I expected. But of course, I'm happy to see you." He reached out as if to touch Fred, but quickly withdrew the hand, suddenly remembering.

Fred nodded, with a superior expression. "Right, you remembered, I did just say it. Touch not working so well, but I appreciate the sentiment."

"Why did you come back?"

Fred tilted his head, with an expression that agreed that it was a fair question. "For George, of course. Poor bloke is despondent without me. Putting on a brave face, naturally. I haven't visited him yet, I wonder if he thinks I reneged."

"On what?"

Fred's expression became a little more serious. "Before the battle, we promised each other that if we died, we'd come back to help out the

other one. I can still help out at the shop. Can't accept money, of course, but I can answer inquiries, show customers new items, things like that."

"Wouldn't that make people nervous? I mean, you usually don't see ghosts in shops. Some people aren't comfortable around them."

"They haven't seen me yet," retorted Fred. "Most ghosts are miserable and gloomy. I'll be cheerful and friendly."

"Fred the Friendly Ghost," Harry said, thinking aloud.

"Mmmm?"

"Nothing, just a Muggle comic I remembered. So, why haven't you visited George yet?" Harry sat on the bed as Fred assumed a horizontal position near the surface of the bed, as if to try to sleep. Fred simulated a yawn and stretched, making Harry grin.

"I would have already, but as it turns out, there's a sort of... committee, you could say, some old ghosts that meet the new arrivals and fill them in on the rules. Never been one for rules, of course, but I did listen. Evidently one of the rules is that you shouldn't appear to the people who knew you for about a week or so after you snuff it. They say it's not decent, and I guess I can see what they mean. If I suddenly popped in on Mum, she'd probably just start crying even harder. I debated seeing George, but decided against it for now."

"But you decided to wake me up," observed Harry.

Fred zoomed up from the bed toward Harry, stopping only a few inches from his face; startled, Harry involuntarily stepped back. "You're special," intoned Fred solemnly. He projected himself forward again, going through Harry's body and out his back. Harry turned around quickly to see a look of surprise on Fred's translucent face. "That was brilliant!" giggled Fred, who proceeded to do it again, rushing through Harry's torso again and again.

Harry felt as though a cool draft was moving through his body. “Will you stop that,” he said, raising his voice, and finally stepping aside, causing Fred to stop.

“Oh, you’re no fun,” pouted Fred.

“Sorry, I just don’t fancy having a cool breeze in my innards. By the way, you being here makes me wonder, why aren’t there ghosts in more places? I mean, I know Muggles can’t see them, but I never see them in Diagon Alley, or some parts of Hogwarts, like the dormitories or classrooms. Why is that?”

Fred had been darting about the room while Harry was talking, and came to a stop directly above Harry, forcing Harry to look up at him. “That was explained by the old farts, too. Hey, too bad ghosts can’t fart, bet that would be really something. I’d never thought about it, but apparently there’s a spell that keeps out those of the ghostly persuasion—I’m going to have to come up with another phrase... how about ‘bodily challenged?’—anyway, it keeps them, us, from going to those places. It seems Hogwarts is the big social club for the white wispies.”

Harry chuckled. “How many different words for ‘ghost’ are you going to try to think of?”

“My lad, I’ve barely begun,” said Fred pompously.

“I’ll bet. Say... now that I think about this, I feel like I should have asked one of the Hogwarts ghosts, but... what happens when you die?”

“Well,” responded Fred thoughtfully, seemingly trying to remember, “you’re met by a large bunny rabbit who tells you that you have to jump onto his back—he’s easily four meters long—and he tells you that you’re going to Hop to Heaven. But if you fall off—”

“Fred, c’mon,” interrupted Harry, “I’m serious.”

“A bit too serious, if you ask me. Lighten up, Harry, have a laugh. You’ve defeated the most powerful wizard in the world, it’s time to

turn over a new leaf. Life is too short. Hey, that's good. 'Life is too short,'" he repeated. "I must use that. Certainly nobody can argue with it."

"So, you're not going to answer my question." After he said it, Harry realized that he'd done the same thing to Kingsley, so maybe it wasn't fair to push Fred.

"All right, Harry, since it seems important to you. But this is privileged. Anything I say to you that isn't a joke, you're not to repeat to a single person. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Come to think of it, don't repeat the jokes, either. I don't want them getting around before I've had a chance to use them with everyone."

Fred floated in front of Harry, at eye level. "It takes you a minute to realize that you're dead, it's kind of disorienting. I sort of looked around for a minute, then I saw this light in the distance. It was very powerful, like it had gravity. I started moving towards it, without thinking, but I noticed something else. There seemed to be another passage, this one kind of 'down,' even though it wasn't really up or down. I got the sense of ghosts being there, and I realized that this was the decision point. If you go towards the light, you don't come back, and I'm sure that's what most people do. There's a natural attraction to it, and it takes a real effort, an effort of will, to take the other path. At least for me. I think ghosts are often sad because the ones who died with, I don't know, emotional problems, or like Myrtle, who're loony as a fruit bat, they find it easier to come back. They feel like they're not done yet, but the trick is, I think, that they're never going to be. That's what they have to work out, and when they do, the light is always there for them. I can sense it, even now."

Harry was solemn. "I think if you explained this to George, he wouldn't stand in your way, of doing that."

"I know," agreed Fred, still serious. It occurred to Harry that he had never seen Fred talk in a serious way for so long a time. "But I do want to help him, and the rest of the family, but especially him. We've

always been such a team, this is hard for him. That light isn't going anywhere. I can still go whenever I want. But why not hang around here for a while."

"In my room?" joked Harry.

Fred grinned. "Sorry. Pleasant as that would be for you, I do have other things to do. But I will look in on you from time to time. Maybe try to get you a sense of humor."

"Good luck. I don't feel very humorous these days."

"So I noticed. But there is one thing that you and I have in common," said Fred, the mischief returning to his tone.

All right, I'll bite, thought Harry. "What's that?"

"Let's leave that as a little riddle for now," replied Fred mysteriously. "I'll take my leave, roam the countryside a bit, and see you at the funeral. But you won't see me, and not a word to anyone."

"I promise," agreed Harry. "Have fun."

"I always do," Fred assured him. "Sorry, can't resist, one last one..." He plunged through Harry's stomach again; Harry turned just in time to see him zip through the wall.

Alone again, Harry shook his head in amazement. Fred the Friendly Ghost... he hoped that the other Weasleys would be happy to see Fred; he supposed it took the edge off the grief he felt at Fred's death. Remembering what Fred had said near the end of the conversation, he wondered if he would ever be able to hear the word 'riddle' without thinking of Tom Riddle. Probably not, he thought.

Now fully awake, he got dressed and went downstairs for breakfast. As he ate, he glanced at Kreacher doing his chores, and wondered what he'd be doing for food if he didn't have a house-elf. Probably eating at the Burrow, he thought. It occurred to him that there must be wizarding supermarkets, but he had no idea how they worked, or where they were. It couldn't be the case that wizards all went to

Muggle supermarkets; he was sure that it would be beneath the Slytherin, pure-blood types.

He picked up the Prophet and read. "Government Still In Chaos" was the headline; he didn't think that was fair to Kingsley, who hadn't had much time to get control of the situation. The article said that there were many in the Ministry who resented Kingsley's sudden and rapid ascent to power, and were throwing obstacles in his path by failing to promptly follow his instructions or discovering reasons why they couldn't, or ensnaring him in bureaucratic red tape. Kingsley's right, thought Harry as he read. He has it worse than I do.

A secondary article on the front page reported that Kingsley had initiated procedures for bringing to justice those who had helped Voldemort. Known Death Eaters, or anyone who had been seen wearing Death Eater robes, were to be immediately arrested, as would anyone seen by three or more reliable witnesses performing one of the Unforgivable curses. Harry winced slightly, recalling his use of the Cruciatus Curse at Hogwarts; he didn't think that the Wizengamot would see retaliation for spitting in someone's face as sufficient cause to use that curse. Fortunately, he thought, there were only two witnesses who would be considered reliable, though he doubted they would prosecute him anyway, or that Luna or McGonagall would raise the issue.

His attention having drifted from the article he was reading, Harry returned his attention to it. Beyond the criteria already mentioned, no firm benchmarks had been laid down for further prosecutions. The article went on to say that the Ministry would soon be debating them, but that it was a sensitive issue, as many in the Ministry itself had followed morally suspect orders from those who took their orders from Voldemort. Kingsley had made it known that next under consideration was prosecution of those who had aided in the persecution of Muggle-borns, whose full legal rights and status had already been restored. Harry felt a savage pleasure as he imagined what would happen to Umbridge. If she spends the rest of her life in Azkaban, he thought, she deserves it.

He read for a while longer, then walked out to the living room and noticed with a wince that the pile of mail had gotten much larger.

What am I going to do if this keeps up, he wondered. His mind wandered to the notion of owl-ordering things—there were no interesting books at Grimmauld Place, he had discovered—and then to money. How did Kreacher live? Was there money stashed in the house that was for him to buy things, if only for his own food? So many things he still didn't know about the wizarding world. I should buy a book on house-elves, he thought.

Still, he would need money at some point, and the last thing he fancied was a trip to Gringotts. Not only did he not want to be out and about in public, but he suspected that after breaking into a top-security vault, to the goblins, he was probably Undesirable No. 1. He opened his mouth, almost shouted 'Dobby,' then realized his mistake. I wish it were Dobby, he thought.

"Kreacher!"

With a sudden pop, Kreacher was there. "Master Harry?"

"Kreacher, I'd like you to get money out of my Gringotts vault."

Kreacher's eyes went wide. "Master?"

Harry was surprised by Kreacher's response. "Is it possible? I mean, they know you're my house-elf. Will they let you in to do it?"

Kreacher still looked bewildered. "Yes, Master Harry, Kreacher believes they will... take security precautions, but allow Kreacher in."

"Then what's the problem?"

"They will be... surprised. It is very rare for a wizard to allow his servant to... fetch gold for him." The last four words were said in an especially awed tone.

Harry almost asked why, but realized he could guess: having gold made people feel important, and they didn't want to entrust the handling of something so valuable to a lowly house-elf, reliable as they might be. "Well, Kreacher, you'll find that since I wasn't raised by

a wizarding family, there's a lot of things about what's normally done that I don't know. Can you think of any reason why I shouldn't do it?"

Kreacher thought for a moment. "No, Master."

"Okay, then. Just get the money, bring it back here, and I'll decide what to do with it. There must be someplace I can put it," he added, half to himself. I should get one of those things Hermione had, those bags that you can put everything but the kitchen sink into. I have to ask her where she bought it. "Anyway, just go ahead, and let me know when you're back."

Kreacher bowed low. "As Master says," he agreed, and Disapparated.

Harry found himself thinking more about what to spend money on, what money could be spend on, without actually going out. His thoughts were interrupted by fire erupting from the fireplace; he looked over to see Ron stepping out, then walking toward Harry. "Hi."

Feeling a sudden surge of affection, Harry surprised himself by walking over and hugging Ron. He could feel Ron's surprise, but Ron returned the hug and let go. With a quizzical expression, Ron asked, "What was that for?"

Harry gestured Ron to the sofa, and they sat. "I'm not even sure," he said with a shrug. "I just... I don't know, I've been alone for the past two days, and... I never really thanked you, you and Hermione, for what you did."

Ron shook his head. "Thank Hermione. She did much more than I did."

"Do I have to remind you that you saved my life?"

"Oh, yeah," said Ron, as if just remembering. "Well, she did too. Anyway, don't worry, I'll probably remind you for the rest of your life."

Harry chuckled. "Whatever you want. So, what's up?"

“Just wanted to see how you were doing. You said you’d been alone, so why didn’t you come over?”

“I can’t really explain. It’s like... it’s good to see you, and Hermione if she came, but I just don’t feel like being around a lot of people right now, and I’ll bet the Burrow is pretty active. And I wouldn’t know what to say anyway.” Harry wished he could tell Ron about Fred’s ghost.

Ron nodded. “I know they’d appreciate just your being there, but I’m sure they’d understand needing to be alone. But I assume you’ll be over tomorrow, for the funeral.” Harry looked down and nodded, saying nothing. There was silence as Ron seemed to be thinking of something to say. “So, what were you doing when I got here?”

Harry gestured to the stack of mail. “Wondering how I was going to read, never mind answer, all that.”

“Bet half of them are asking for interviews,” suggested Ron. “We’ve gotten a half dozen owls asking the same thing.”

“Really?”

“People want to know what happened,” said Ron; Harry thought from Ron’s tone that Ron thought he should talk about it, but he wasn’t sure. “They know the Hogwarts part, of course, what you said to You-Know—” Ron interrupted himself in response to Harry’s sharp glance. “You ever say ‘You-Know-Who’ again, and I’ll go find the Elder Wand and hex you with it.”

Ron rolled his eyes. “I’m so scared,” he retorted, in a gently mocking tone. “Anyway, give me a break, it’s just a habit. I know he’s dead—”

“And he’s not coming back,” said Harry firmly.

“I heard you told Kingsley that. When did you talk to him, anyway?” Harry described Kingsley’s visit, and asked how Ron had heard that. “It was in the most recent interview request owl. It said Kingsley had said publicly that you’d said he wasn’t coming back—”

“Who isn’t coming back?” Harry prompted Ron meaningfully.

“Anybody ever tell you that you can be a pain in the ass?” Ron paused, sighed, and finally said, “All right, if it’ll make you happy, V-V-... wow, it’s hard to say the name, such a habit...” Ron seemed to summon all his willpower. “Voldemort’s not coming back. Are you happy now? Am I to be spared your merciless retaliation?”

“We’ll see,” said Harry with a small smile. “Anyway, Kingsley said...”

“He was quoted as saying, ‘I talked to Harry Potter about this, and he said, “Voldemort’s not coming back this time, trust me.” He was very confident, and if anyone would know, he would.’ The reporter, I think from Witch Weekly, wanted me and Hermione to confirm it, and to say how you knew. Hermione sent them back an owl—not that it’ll do any good, they’ll keep on asking—but she said that it was your story, and the first words said about it publicly would be said by you, that she and I weren’t going to comment.”

Harry again felt a surge of affection. “Thanks.”

“Her idea,” Ron said offhandedly.

“But you agreed.”

“Like I had a choice, you know how she is.” Harry chuckled. “I mean, I would talk to them, but I don’t care that much one way or the other. Are you going to?”

Harry himself wasn’t sure why he was so reluctant. “I guess I feel like I felt at the Hog’s Head, or giving that Skeeter interview, in fifth year. I don’t feel like I want, or need, to make my life completely public. That’s been done to me more than enough already. He’s gone, Kingsley told them what I said, that should be enough.” He found that he resented Kingsley slightly for repeating he’d said—for repeating anything he said—without telling Harry he was going to do so. I don’t want to have to watch what I say around him, thought Harry, but now that he’s a politician, maybe I’ll have to. “Besides, who’s to say that if I gave the whole story, people would believe me? Or that they wouldn’t still believe that he might come back?”

"I guess I can see that," Ron agreed. "You definitely have long experience of people not believing what you say." Harry grunted, remembering the reaction when he had talked about Voldemort's return. "They'd probably believe you now, though, after what happened. Not that I'm saying you should," he added hastily. "Obviously, that's up to you."

Harry almost gave a sarcastic response like 'that's very good of you,' but held back at the last second, recognizing that Ron was trying to be considerate. He nodded, then to change the subject, said, "I guess things are kind of grim at the Burrow."

Ron nodded, and Harry could see the sorrow on his face. "It's still hard to believe he's gone. We all feel really bad, but especially for George, of course. They were such a team..." They were silent for a minute, and Ron spoke again. "Anyway, Mum's just trying to keep busy, I think. Finally able to return to the Burrow the day before yesterday, she's been moving things from Aunt Muriel's—she wouldn't say it directly, since Muriel let them stay, but I think she's really sick of Muriel by now, I know I would be." Recalling Muriel's behavior at Bill and Fleur's wedding, Harry couldn't help but think that being on the run was preferable. "She's been setting things up at home, so she's busy, and that's good for her. She's got us all helping, of course, giving instructions every few minutes to do this or do that. I took the opportunity when no one happened to be in the living room to pop over here."

"Is Hermione there?"

"Yes, she was thinking about going back to Hogwarts, but it's in a real state, with the damage it took during the battle, so she decided to come to the Burrow. I feel kind of bad for her, she doesn't have a home now, since she had to send her family to Australia." Noting Harry's expression, Ron added, "C'mon, don't feel bad about that. It was her decision, our decision, to go with you, and she did what she had to do to protect her family. She can always bring them back, modify their memories again, if she wants to. She knows that, but she's not sure what she's going to do yet. It's so soon after everything that happened, I think she needs to get used to the new situation now."

"I can really understand that," said Harry emphatically.

"I guess you feel the same way. Yeah, everything is really different now. I also feel bad for Hermione about the N.E.W.T.s, since that was always so important to her—"

"I know that, Ron," Harry interrupted him sharply. "I didn't ask—"

"I know you didn't! Blimey, can't a guy say anything?" Harry wanted to retort, but held his tongue. "I reckon I'd better never say anything about what happened at Malfoy Manor, or you'll really go off the deep end." Even angrier, Harry again bit his lip not to respond. "Look, Harry, get this through your head. She decided, we decided—"

"I know—"

"You're not acting like it! We knew there would be consequences of helping you do that, possibly including death. Look, she got tortured, and..." Harry could see Ron trying to keep emotion off his face, and mostly failing. "When someone you love gets tortured like that, it feels like it's happening to you too. It's horrible. But I don't blame you for that, she doesn't blame you—"

"Even though it was my saying 'Voldemort' that got us there in the first place?" Saying it out loud brought back more regret than he would have guessed; he realized that he'd been so busy after that happened, and grieving for Dobby, that he'd shoved it to the back of his mind. But now it hit him full force, and regret and self-hate washed over him; because of his carelessness, a traumatic event had happened to Hermione, and Dobby was dead. In that instant, he felt he would give anything to change what had happened.

"It was a mistake, Harry. We all make them. You want to know how many times I beat myself up over leaving you guys? You still blame me for that?" Having clearly gotten his answer from Harry's face, Ron went on. "I didn't think so. Well, we don't blame you, either. But my point was that everything we did was our choice. You did what you had to do, well, so did we. You're not the only Gryffindor around here, you know."

Harry knew Ron was right; it was just such a reflex to blame himself. He sighed. "So, I guess I'm being kind of self-centered, then, huh?" he asked, not totally sure whether or not he was being sarcastic.

"Well, it'd be understandable. You are the Chosen One, after all." Ron only smiled after Harry's annoyance was clear. "There's another thing I'll hex you for, if you keep it up."

Ron chuckled. "Well, with all these threats, I must be doing something right. No, I wasn't going to keep it up anyway, it's too much of a Malfoy thing. 'That Harry Potter, thinks he's the Chosen One.' Funny thing is, you were the Chosen One. But the thing most people don't get is that being Chosen isn't all its cracked up to be."

"Everyone wants to hear the story, Kingsley says," muttered Harry. "But no one in his right mind would want to live it."

"Malfoy might," offered Ron. "But then, he's not really in his right mind."

"You really think he would?"

Ron shrugged. "Hermione thinks so. She once said, last summer I think, that Malfoy always taunted you that you liked the publicity and recognition because it made him angry, that he would have liked it. But you never acted like you liked it, so Hermione thinks he was putting his feelings onto you."

Harry smiled a little. "Sometimes I think Hermione thinks too much."

Ron laughed. "Only now you're realizing this? Wow, you're slow."

There was a short silence; Harry was thinking about Malfoy and his actions over the past year or two. Ron surprised him by mentioning the same topic. "So what do you think is the deal with Malfoy now? Is he, well, he's not good, but is he, you know, less bad? I was surprised you saved him at Hogwarts. Well, not too surprised, I know you, but you know what I mean."

Harry nodded his understanding. "I do. It was, I guess, one of those things you do when you have no time to think. Even though he was, you know, Malfoy, it seemed wrong to let him die when I could stop it. As for your question, I don't know. But I know Dumbledore had hopes for him, and that may have influenced me. Malfoy was heading down his father's path, and Dumbledore hoped to stop that, and asked Snape to help him stop it. Once you kill, there's no going back from that. Malfoy probably sees himself as a victim because he and his family suffered a lot at Voldemort's hands in the past year, since that business with the prophecy. But if they hadn't been leaning in that direction anyway, they wouldn't have been in that position. It's like they rolled the dice, and lost." Harry thought for a minute. "But I'd guess that Malfoy himself isn't sure whether he's good or not. If he thinks he is, well, it's kind of relative."

"I guess it's a different thing entirely from just calling people 'Mudblood,' which he probably thinks is reasonable," agreed Ron. "Well, if I never have to deal with the git again, I'll be quite happy."

As Ron spoke the last sentence, another letter fell down the mail chute, landing on top of the neatly arranged pile; Harry supposed Kreacher straightened them out every now and then. Harry wondered whether it was normal house-elf behavior, or special service because Harry had accomplished what was his former master's fondest wish.

"Mind if I look through those?" Ron asked. "Not open them, I'm just curious who they're from."

Harry casually waved his assent. "You can open them, for all I care. I've just been avoiding them."

Ron walked over to the mail pile and picked up a handful. Looking at the top one, he opened his mouth in astonishment. "Well, I'll be... Harry, the one that just came... it's from Narcissa Malfoy!"

"Oh, good," moaned Harry sarcastically. "I can't wait to hear it."

"Well, I'm interested," said Ron. With a gesture, he asked to open the letter; Harry nodded.

Ron opened the letter and read. "Harry Potter. As you know, I saved your life that night, a detail that you have seen fit to tell no one. You, not to mention those you care about, are greatly in my debt. I expect you to come to Malfoy Manor at noon tomorrow, carrying no wand—" Ron stopped reading as his eyebrows went up in disbelief.

Harry scoffed. "Yeah, sure, that'll happen."

"...to discuss the matter. I expect that you will inform all, especially the Ministry, of my family's role in the Dark Lord's downfall, and to intercede with the Ministry as necessary. Please reply to confirm your acknowledgment." Ron's mouth was hanging open. "Do you believe the nerve of that woman? She's acting like you're her house-elf!"

Harry could do nothing but shake his head in wonder, and he started to laugh. To Ron's quizzical expression, he shook his head as his laughter faded. "It's just so absurd, there's not much to do but laugh. Well, I actually do want to write her back now. I'm inspired."

With Ron's help, he found paper and writing implements; he didn't know where many things were in the house. He thought of calling Kreacher, but he didn't want to get into the habit of calling him for every little thing. He sat at the desk in the living room and wrote, taking ten minutes. Finishing, he asked Ron, "So, do you want to hear it?"

"Of course," agreed Ron with a grin.

"Okay, here it is. 'Narcissa—' She'll be really ticked that I just use her first name—I acknowledge receiving your owl, and the fact that you saved my life. I have not forgotten that. I also have not forgotten that you didn't save me until you knew that Draco was back in the castle, making it clear that your motivation was his safety. If your intention was to help bring down Voldemort, you wouldn't have asked me that first. So, let's not pretend that I owe you anything. I don't. If anything, you owe me; I saved Draco's life in the castle before going to the forest, and with no ulterior motive. So if you want to talk to me, you should look at me as an equal, not as a house-elf that you can order around. Sincerely, Harry Potter." With a grin, Harry added, "I got the house-elf idea from you."

“Nice to be part of the process. But good letter, though. I bet steam’ll be coming out of her ears. She deserves it, talking to you like that.”

“I think her letter was kind of a negotiating position,” suggested Harry. “Like, to see if she can get me to see her as being above me. I figured I’d be just as aggressive. But I left open the possibility of meeting her because, even though I said otherwise in the letter, I do feel as though I owe her, at least a little.”

“I wondered about that,” said Ron. “You told me that Dumbledore said that Pettigrew would owe you a debt for saving him, and it looks like he was right. But does her motivation have anything to do with it? Do you really owe her less if she had other motivations?”

“I’m not sure, to be honest.”

“She’ll think you have some pull with the Ministry, she’ll want you to help get them off, I suppose. Are you willing to do that?”

Harry thought. “Lucius, not a chance. He’s done too much. But her and Draco... possible. I don’t know. Just as payback, it doesn’t seem unreasonable. But I feel like before I said a word on her behalf, I’d want to know for sure that she and Draco wouldn’t do again what they did this time.”

“You mean, you want them not to be evil. Good luck with that.”

“I suppose,” sighed Harry. “Well, to hell with it, I’m not going to think about it anymore. Maybe she’ll be so offended by my letter that she’ll give up.”

Ron shook his head. “Let me put it this way. If it’s a choice between sucking up to you, and going to Azkaban, I think she’ll suck up.”

Harry didn’t feel like talking about it anymore. “We’ll see.” A strange thought occurred to him, and he decided to act on it. “Hey, I have an idea. How about a game of chess?”

“Chess?” repeated Ron. His blank look told Harry that was the last thing he’d been expecting. “Yeah, sure. But why that?”

“Because it’s ordinary. We’ve been hunting down Voldemort for the past year, and I miss the idea of doing something that people do when they’re sitting around with nothing to do. If that makes any sense.”

Ron smiled. “I understand. Yeah, it sounds good. I’ll give you a good thrashing, don’t worry.”

“Oh, no, I’m going to win,” said Harry earnestly.

“And why’s that?” responded a smug Ron.

“Well, I’m the Chosen One. I can’t lose.”

Harry grinned as Ron laughed. “Well, seeing as you’re the Chosen One, I’ll let you Choose black or white, not that it’ll do you any good. Don’t worry, I’ll get the board, I remember where it is from when I was here two years ago.”

They played two games, both won by Ron, as they were silent sometimes and chatted about unimportant matters when they did speak. As Harry had expected, it felt good to do nothing important.

About an hour later, Kreacher suddenly Apparated into the living room. “Master Harry, it is finished,” he said breathlessly.

“Good, thanks, Kreacher,” he said. Kreacher visibly swelled with pride when paid such a direct compliment. “I just realized, I forgot to give an amount. How much did you take out?”

“All of it, Master Harry.”

Harry was dumbstruck. “All of it?” It took great self-control for him not to lash out at Kreacher. Still, he couldn’t keep the disbelief out of his tone. “Why did you take out all of it?”

“Kreacher is sorry, Master Harry, but it was necessary. House-elves has good hearing, better than goblins think. Goblins went off to talk among themselves. They is angry with Harry Potter. One even suggested harming Harry Potter if he comes to Gringotts.” This was said with disgust, as if Kreacher couldn’t imagine anything so loathsome. “Others said no, but they was not so sure. Goblins came back, said to Kreacher that Harry Potter should come to Gringotts. Now is adult, must sign papers. Kreacher thinks is not safe for Harry Potter at Gringotts, so Kreacher took out all of Harry Potter’s vault.”

Harry and Ron exchanged impressed looks. “Wow,” said Ron. “They’d be stupid to do it—Wizards wouldn’t take kindly to someone, especially you, being treated badly in Gringotts—but it’s better not to take the chance. I think Kreacher did the right thing.”

“I have to agree.” Harry turned to Kreacher. “Kreacher, thank you very much. That was very good thinking.” Again, Kreacher’s pride was clearly visible. “Now, I have to figure out where I’m going to keep all the gold.”

“It is no problem, Master Harry. This house has a secret place in the walls to keep valuable things. Only the owner of the house can open it.”

Well, that’s convenient, thought Harry. “You mean, a safe?”

Kreacher looked confused. “Yes, Master Harry, it is very safe.”

“No, I mean...” Never mind, thought Harry, they may not even have safes in the wizarding world. “Which room is it in?”

“It can be reached from any room,” explained Kreacher.

“How do I open it?”

“Master Harry must point his wand at the wall, and say, ‘Toujours pur.’”

Harry and Ron exchanged a look. “Naturally,” Harry muttered.

He did as Kreacher had instructed, and the wall suddenly seemed to flutter, as if was made of liquid, with a wave rippling through it. A square section of the wall, one side being only slightly less than Harry's height, moved inward in such a way that Harry thought there must be a part of the house sticking out if one looked at it from the outside, yet of course he knew that would not be the case.

What impressed him even more were the very tall, cylindrical containers that were already there. Each was made of what appeared to be gold, and was one foot wide and about three feet high; they reminded Harry of tree stumps. Gold tree stumps, he added to himself. One stacked atop another barely fitted into the space provided, though Harry realized that the space could probably be magically expanded as necessary. There were thirty such containers, along with many loose Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts. Harry glanced at Ron, who was gawking.

"What's in those containers?" Harry asked Kreacher.

"Galleons, Master Harry."

"Whose are they?"

Kreacher looked surprised. "They are yours, Master Harry. They belong to the owner of the house."

"How many in each one?"

"Each one has one hundred thousand Galleons." Ron's mouth fell open; Harry's eyebrows went up. "So, that's..."

Ron was faster with the arithmetic. "Three million Galleons!" he exclaimed.

Harry felt a little embarrassed, especially with Ron there; it wasn't as though he didn't have enough money already. Kreacher seemed unimpressed; he had obviously seen this many times before. "Why didn't they keep this in Gringotts?" asked Harry.

“They kept some Galleons in Gringotts, to keep up appearances,” explained Kreacher. “But they did not trust goblins—”

“I’m beginning to identify with them more and more on that,” muttered Harry.”

“Indeed, Master Harry, Kreacher has never liked goblins,” volunteered Kreacher, with obvious disgust. “But today Kreacher discovered how treacherous they truly are.” After a pause, Kreacher asked, “Does Master want Kreacher to put his gold here?”

“Um, yeah, sure,” agreed Harry; he certainly couldn’t think of another place to put it, and he supposed it was safe where it was. “But leave out a few hundred, in case I want to buy something.”

“A few hundred Galleons is walking-around money,” said Ron, with a neutral expression. “Must be nice.”

A frustrated Harry tried to keep his emotions off his face. He knew Ron was sensitive about this, and that Ron was trying not to show the envy he probably felt. He wanted to remind Ron that he hadn’t asked for it, but he’d enjoyed Ron’s company, and didn’t want to get into a fight. “I don’t have any idea of what I might buy,” he said. “Well, maybe one of those things Hermione had,” he added, gesturing to the pouch from which Kreacher was dumping the gold he’d removed from Harry’s vault. “That looks pretty convenient.” It occurred to Harry that he wouldn’t mind looking at some catalogs, to see what kind of things he could buy to make life easier. He would say no such thing to Ron, of course; he intended whatever spending he did to come to the attention of Ron or the Weasleys as little as possible.

Fortunately for Harry, Kreacher soon finished putting away the gold, so he was able to close up the wall, making his money easier to ignore. But Ron still looked put out, annoying Harry further. He couldn’t help himself, so he said, “Ron, look at it this way. You know what my family life was like. I had money—though I didn’t know I had it—but no real family. You had the opposite. If you could choose to go through my childhood, or yours, which would you choose?”

Ron seemed abashed, though he managed a small smile. "Hermione once, I think it was last year, asked me this exact question. After I said 'mine,' of course, she said something like, you don't hear Harry whining about his terrible childhood, do you? I get the point. It's just..."

He trailed off in embarrassment, but Harry understood. "Not usually staring you in the face like that. I do understand. I've probably had the same thought, like when I looked at a Christmas picture of you and the family, thinking, wow, I wish I could have had that. My Christmases consisted of watching Dudley open presents, hoping maybe I'd get a chance to play with them when he wasn't around."

"Now, now, don't start whining," admonished Ron jokingly.

"I could go on for hours," said Harry. "I never would have thought that I'd be here, seven years later, the hero of the wizarding world," he added, with mock pomposity toward the end of the sentence. "Do I look like a hero?"

"We both do," replied Ron. "We still have all those cuts, from when we got away from Gringotts. I'm kind of hoping one of mine becomes a scar. Then I can say, 'oh, that's the one I got when we got away from Gringotts on the dragon.'"

They talked for another hour before Ron went back to the Burrow. Harry had dinner, and asked Kreacher to gather some owl-order catalogs the next day so he could do some shopping. He doubted he would be able to use three million Galleons, however.

As he tried to drift off to sleep that night, the thought occurred to him that he would have to go back out in public the next day. He didn't look forward to it, but it didn't occur to him to wonder why that was.

Chapter 2

The Funeral

Harry turned over in bed the next morning, knowing it was time to get up, but wanting to put it off a little longer. He'd had a dream involving Dudley and the Dursleys, but in the dream, he'd been an equal family member, and it was as if they were a normal family. Dream on, he thought sardonically.

He reluctantly opened his eyes, and immediately registered that another face was right in front of him, only a few inches away. "Aaaaaggghhh!" screamed Harry, who recoiled away in shock, adrenaline suddenly pumping through his body.

Fred laughed uproariously. "Goddamnit, don't do that!" shouted Harry angrily, though even in his shock he knew he couldn't really be angry with Fred, who was still not finished laughing. "Oh, dear," said Fred as he struggled to speak while laughing. "That was sooooo worth it..."

Only Harry's affection for Fred stopped him from berating Fred further. He caught his breath as Fred's laughter started to die down. Still, he couldn't stop himself from noting, "I guess this is part of the reason that some people do that spell that keeps out ghosts."

"Something like that," agreed Fred. "But I know you won't." Don't tempt me, thought Harry. "Funny thing... when I laugh, I catch my breath, even though I'm not really breathing. Old habits die hard, I guess."

"I suppose you're going to do this to everybody in your family?"

"Wouldn't surprise me," agreed Fred. "But it probably won't be as funny as it was the first time." Fred chuckled again at the memory.

"Glad I could help," said Harry sarcastically. He had finally calmed down; he felt that his heart rate was almost back to normal. Hell of a way to get woken up. "I guess you can be pretty sure that your family won't put up that spell, the..."

"I don't know what it's called either. I think of it as a 'keep out' sign. But yes, I think I'll get a lot of latitude."

Harry remembered something he'd thought of yesterday. "You know, I wanted to say thank you, for helping out in the battle."

Fred shrugged modestly. "Just so long as I'm thought of as a hero, then it's all worth it."

Harry hadn't really expected a serious response, but he was sure that Fred knew he was serious. "I'm sure it'll get mentioned at the funeral today."

"I'm looking forward to it, hearing all those nice things about myself. Of course, I suppose it'll be kind of grim. I was hanging around the Burrow yesterday, and it's not really a happy place. But in a few days, I hope to change that." He zoomed around the room in a circle a few times, then went under the floor, and up through the bed. "Well, must be off. See you later."

"Bye," said Harry as Fred sped through the wall. What's he going to do all the time, wondered Harry. It must be boring, being a ghost.

Harry got dressed and went downstairs, where Kreacher was preparing breakfast. How does he know when to do it? Wonder if he puts the same charm on me when I'm sleeping that Kingsley did the other day.

He looked at the Prophet that was on the table waiting for him. The main article was again about the new government, but at least the headline wasn't critical of Kingsley this time.

Shacklebolt To Take Aggressive Steps Against Death Eaters, Sympathizers

"Those Who Supported the Old Regime Must Be Held To Account"

New Minister of Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt, installed as temporary Minister only three days ago by the Council of Elders in the wake of the collapse of the Death Eater-controlled previous government,

indicated yesterday that he would not be forgiving of wizards who actively supported that government.

Insisting that he wanted justice, not vengeance, Shacklebolt said, "I take my lesson from what happened seventeen years ago, when Voldemort was defeated for the first time by Harry Potter. Only his most fervent supporters were sent to Azkaban at that time; many more who should have ended up there were allowed to go free, claiming to have been Imperiused, blackmailed, or bewitched in some other way. Those claims were often accepted at face value, without being carefully checked out. In retrospect, that was obviously a mistake, a mistake I do not intend to repeat."

Shacklebolt gave no specifics regarding how he intended to get at the truth, saying the matter was still under review. Asked if he was considering the use of Veritaserum on suspected Death Eater sympathizers, Shacklebolt gave the same answer, conspicuously refusing to rule it out.

Observers note that a likely reason that many Death Eaters were allowed to slip back into society seventeen years ago was that the use of Veritaserum was considered, but in the end, rejected. At the time, the strongest opponent of its use was Albus Dumbledore, who said its use was morally wrong because it forced a person to testify against himself. Dumbledore's influence helped turn the tide of the debate in his favor, but this time, no one of such stature is known to oppose the idea. Only Harry Potter could be said to have similar influence, and he has not been heard from since his triumph over his old nemesis.

Asked whether it was possible that his aggressive stance might reach too many people and cause a backlash, Shacklebolt dismissed the idea. "I know that a lot of people, especially but not only in the Ministry, did things they would rather not have done but had to do. I will be understanding of that. Even though I and many others personally fought against Voldemort, I did not expect that everyone would endure great hardship in order to do so. I make a distinction between those who did what they had to do and no more, and those who went out of their way to be helpful to the Voldemort regime, who did more than they needed to do to avoid persecution and

punishment. Failing to hold accountable those who strongly supported Voldemort dishonors the rest of us.”

Shacklebolt initiated the process by ordering the arrest and detention of sixty-two individuals, mostly Ministry officials, who were well-known supporters of the old regime; so far thirty-two have been apprehended and confined to Azkaban pending further investigation. Shacklebolt has promised that each case will be reviewed by the Wizengamot before final judgment is passed, but he said that first the Wizengamot itself must be cleared of Dark influence. Most prominent among those recently arrested is Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge, who was said by many to relish her work of prosecuting—some say persecuting—Muggle-born wizards.

Shacklebolt again indicated that repairing relations with Muggle-born wizards would be a priority, announcing the formation of a new section of the Ministry which will be responsible for assisting and looking out for the interests of Muggle-born wizards. It will be called the Wizarding Unity Department and its leader will possess Undersecretary rank, an indication of the department’s importance to Shacklebolt. “It is important not only to me, but to all of society,” clarified Shacklebolt. “Recent events have shown where blind prejudice can lead, and in view of what happened, it cannot be argued that this department is not necessary. If some among us do not have rights, then the rights of all of us are threatened.” Asked if that included the right to not be forced to incriminate oneself, an obviously irritated Shacklebolt repeated that the matter was under review, and he would have no further comment.

Finishing the article, Harry thought it seemed reasonably fair, but that the writer had taken a real swipe at Kingsley in the last sentence. He found that he had no problem with the idea of Veritaserum being used, and he was surprised that Dumbledore had disapproved of it seventeen years ago, since he used it to get the truth out of Barty Crouch after Voldemort returned. He assumed the sending of thirty-two people to Azkaban had quieted the Prophet’s notion that the government was in ‘chaos.’ I guess the Aurors, at least, will do what he tells them to do.

On the inside of the paper, there was an article about the ordeals that persecuted Muggle-borns had faced, and one about Hogwarts, which Harry found of particular interest. McGonagall was quoted as saying that N.E.W.T.s and O.W.L.s would be held, but since there had been such disruption in the academic life of the school, the testing for the subjects of Muggle Studies and Defense Against the Dark Arts would be held in late August, and students would be offered special summer intensive classes in order to prepare.

He hadn't even thought about his school life since Voldemort's defeat; all he knew was that a year ago he'd written off the N.E.W.T.s, since what he had ended up doing was far more important. Should he try to do anything about them? Was it even important? He wasn't sure, and like most other matters regarding his future, he didn't want to think about it.

He read various books for the next hour, though he wasn't especially interested in any of them. Sometimes there was nothing to do except read, but reading seemed too much like schoolwork, and it seemed strange to do schoolwork when you had no school.

Though he tried to read, his mind wandered to the funeral. He felt that while he would be happy to spend time with the Weasleys, part of him—the purely selfish part, he admitted to himself—would rather stay at home. Why do I feel this way, he wondered. Because I know I'll be pestered relentlessly when I go out in public? Because I've been with other people for months on end and just want to be alone? He had never been that good at understanding feelings, even his own. Hermione would probably know, he thought wryly. These musings were interrupted by Kreacher bringing the catalogs he'd asked for. He spent the next few hours looking through them, with much more interest than he'd had in his books. Finding several items he wanted to buy, he filled out the order forms, then remembered with more than a twinge of regret that he had no owl. Kreacher, however, was more than happy to go out and round up the items that Harry had indicated. Deciding to have lunch with the Weasleys, he put away the catalogs and headed for the fireplace.

Stepping out of the fireplace, he saw the face he should have been prepared to see, but wasn't. Ginny had clearly been dusting the living

room when she heard the fireplace and turned around. Suddenly he didn't know what to say, or do. "Hi," he said.

"Glad you came, finally," she replied, with a neutral tone. "We were beginning to wonder if you didn't want to see us." He realized that she had deliberately used the wrong pronoun, and suddenly understood her attitude. It had never occurred to him that she might be unhappy that he hadn't made it a priority to see her, now that after so many long months, he finally had the opportunity. He didn't understand why she hadn't just come to Grimmauld Place, though, as Ron had.

"I do. I just... need some time." He hadn't planned to say those words, but they were what he felt. He suddenly felt exposed, having accidentally said what he was thinking.

She looked at him for a moment, impassive. He hoped she wouldn't take his words as a lack of interest. He didn't want her to give up on him, but he didn't feel ready to get more deeply involved just then.

She glanced down for a few seconds; he couldn't see her eyes. "Well, you have been through a lot," she said, her voice still neutral. "This is the first time you've left Grimmauld Place since then?" He nodded. "When would you have left if not for the funeral?"

He shrugged. "I have no idea," he replied.

She nodded. "Well, I'll tell them you're here." As she called out "Harry's here!" loudly, a part of him wanted to say something to her to make her feel better, as he knew she couldn't be happy with what he'd said. But it was too late, and he realized there was nothing he could say anyway, or he probably would've said it already.

Molly briskly walked into the room, followed by Arthur. Her expression was that of someone trying to put on a brave front as she hugged him tightly. "Harry, dear, how are you doing?"

"Fine," he answered as he returned her hug. He knew it was far from true, but to answer any other way would invite questions he didn't want to answer.

"That's good, dear," she responded, holding his shoulders. "You know, don't you, that you can come here any time you want? You can consider this house as if it were your house." Her tone didn't admonish him for not having come, but her eyes did.

"I know," he said, understanding her message. "Thanks." She'd made him feel as though he should explain himself, but he resisted the urge, as he felt he shouldn't have to.

"Harry," Arthur greeted him with an outstretched hand, which Harry shook.

"It's good to see you, Mr. Weasley," he said sincerely. "All of you."

"Harry, we'd like you to call us Arthur and Molly, now that you're of age. We've already told Hermione."

"That's right friendly of you, Arthur," said George pompously as he entered the living room.

Despite his mood, Harry couldn't help but smile. "Not you, George," said Molly sternly as George offered Harry his hand. Harry saw Arthur suppress a smile. Harry held back the impulse to ask George how he was doing; it seemed like a very insensitive question under the circumstances. He settled for nodding as he shook George's hand.

"Come on, then, lunch is almost ready," said Molly, putting her arm around Harry's shoulders and guiding him toward the kitchen. Just then, Hermione, Ron, and Percy walked down the stairs together. Walking faster, Hermione reached Harry first, and hugged him. "I haven't seen you for three days, it feels strange," joked Harry as she let him go.

"We just needed a break from each other," she responded in kind.

Percy stepped forward tentatively and offered his hand. "Harry, I'd like to apologize..."

Shaking his head, Harry accepted the handshake. "You already did."

“Yes, but to you specifically. I was part of what made your life difficult, so, for what it’s worth—”

“You came back and fought Voldemort,” replied Harry; Percy squirmed a little on hearing the name. “That’s all the apology I need. But thanks.” Molly shouted into the living room, and they all headed into the kitchen. Harry exchanged greetings with Charlie, and they sat down.

Molly had prepared a large spread of food, and plates flew across the table, two almost colliding in midair. “Clockwise, clockwise, how many times do I have to tell you?” Molly chided Ron, the apparent offender.

“It’s nice to see that nothing has changed around here,” joked Percy.

“You mean that it’s clockwise, or that Ron disregards the rule?” asked Ginny, making a face at Ron.

Percy grinned. “Everything.” Harry could think of one thing that had changed, but nobody was mentioning that. He had no doubt missed the worst of the family’s grief.

Harry figured he would ask some questions, get caught up on what was happening while he was alone in Grimmauld Place. “Mr. Weasley—sorry, Arthur,” he amended, reacting to Arthur’s glance. “Have you gone back to work at the Ministry? Are you going to?”

“Well, as the Prophet said the other day, the place is pretty chaotic,” said Arthur. “Of course, someone else has been doing the job I used to do for some time now, so it’s not exactly as though I have a desk to go to. Two days ago, Kingsley set up a kind of informal committee. Twelve current or former Ministry employees, of whom I’m one, who Kingsley knows for certain either fought the government actively, or resisted from inside to the best of their ability. Between the twelve of us, we know quite well who did what, or at least, who were enthusiastic supporters of the last government. We started from the top down. Partly because the higher they were, the easier it was to know, and also because it was important to get those people out of there as soon as possible. Politically, it was also preferable to show results quickly.”

“So, those were the thirty-two that went to Azkaban,” said Harry.

“You read the Prophet, good,” replied Arthur. “Yes, that was them—“

“What happened to the ones that were already there?” asked Harry, thinking of Xenophilius Lovegood.

“They were all released. We didn’t do careful checks, so it’s not impossible that we released a few actual criminals, but we knew that most who were there were political prisoners. A few were Order members, a lot of others were people we knew. We didn’t wait for the process to go through bureaucracy, because it could have taken forever. We just got them out of there.

“Anyway,” continued Arthur, “Some of the sixty-two had already made themselves scarce, of course, because they knew their number was up. Others, like Umbridge, were so high up that they didn’t think they could be touched, and went back to work like nothing happened. I hear she put up quite a struggle, the Aurors who arrested her had to Stun her.” Harry exchanged a grin with Ron and Hermione.

“What about Runcorn?” asked Harry.

“He’s one of the sixty-two, he got away,” said Arthur. “Speaking of which, Ron tells me that I unknowingly had a conversation with you a while back. I wanted to thank you; the warning turned out to be very helpful. At the time, I couldn’t imagine why Runcorn was telling me that.”

“So, I guess you’ve been really busy.”

Arthur nodded. “I’ll be getting back after the funeral. There’s still quite a lot to do; getting rid of that bunch was just a necessary first step.”

“Come to think of it, I’m surprised they—Kingsley—asked you, since...” Harry trailed off, but knew his meaning was clear to everyone.

“He said if I declined, he’d understand,” said Arthur somberly. “But I thought it would be better to keep occupied, and this was very important. You did your job, Harry, you and Ron and Hermione. Now we have to do ours.”

“How about you, Percy?” asked Harry, pleased to be able to talk to Percy again, especially now that Percy seemed to have given up his veneer of self-importance and pomposity. “Are you helping out there?”

Percy exchanged a slightly discomfited look with his father. “In the sense of not being regarded as a suspect, yes,” he half-joked. “Luckily, I hadn’t gone along with the old regime so enthusiastically. If you have a lust for power, you can overlook a lot, but even I couldn’t be so blind as to not notice what they were doing to Muggles. I didn’t like it at all, of course, but there was nothing I could do. Anyway, I helped Dad and the group a bit, tried to organize my section. A lot of people are pretty nervous right now.”

“Because they’re worried about being arrested?” asked Hermione.

Percy nodded. “Some people fall on the borderline of what Minister Shacklebolt has described as forgivable behavior from the old regime. So you hear a lot of people going out of their way to talk about how much they didn’t like the Thicknesse government, and the things they supposedly did to undermine or resist it. Some of it is probably true, some isn’t; some is believable, some isn’t. It’s all over the map. They’re going to have a hard time sorting it all out.”

“What do you think about them using Veritaserum?” asked Hermione.

Again, Percy exchanged a look with Arthur. “I suppose I’d take it, though I’d want to know first what questions they were going to ask, that they were going to stay away from anything too personal—“

“I didn’t mean, would you be willing to take it,” clarified Hermione uncomfortably. “I mean, what—“

“I knew what you meant,” Percy assured her. “But it’s reasonable to answer in terms of how I would feel about doing it. In general, I think

doing it sets a bad precedent, but Minister Shacklebolt has a point; we don't want people like Lucius Malfoy creeping back into the woodwork like before." Harry saw a very dark look cross Ginny's face, and realized that he probably thought a lot less about Tom Riddle's diary than she did.

"I don't especially like it either," agreed Arthur. "Kingsley asked me what I thought about it. I said I wasn't comfortable with it, and if it was used, it should only be on people against whom there are specific, credible accusations. We can't just give it to everybody and see what pops up."

"Has Lucius Malfoy been arrested?" asked Ginny.

"There's a warrant for his arrest, but no," said Arthur. "Of course, Aurors were sent to Malfoy Manor, but he wasn't there. He knows better than to show his face now."

Ginny turned to Harry. "Ron told us about that letter you got."

Harry glanced at Ron, who gave a mildly apologetic shrug; Harry wondered how much else of his visit had been related to the others. "Yeah, that was really something," he said, rolling his eyes.

"I want to warn you, Harry," she said, very seriously, "If you so much as lift a finger to help Lucius Malfoy, I'll never speak to you again." She kept her gaze on him to emphasize her words.

The others all looked at her in surprise; Harry's eyebrows went high. He looked at Ron. "Didn't you tell her—"

"I did!"

"Yes, he told me what you said," said Ginny. "But I wanted to make sure you knew how I felt. I didn't want you changing your mind on some charitable impulse."

"Ginny, that was a very unkind thing to say," admonished Molly, in a disappointed tone.

"It's okay," Harry said, looking at Ginny. "I understand why she said it." He realized that her comment had a deeper meaning: if he showed Lucius mercy, she would be so angry with him that it would jeopardize any future relationship they might have, and she didn't want that to happen. "I promise," he said, meeting her eyes, "that I'll do nothing to help him, nothing to get him any kind of leniency or lighter sentence."

She glanced down, then looked at him, mild resignation on her face. "I'd rather you said that you'll aggressively do everything you can to make sure he never sets foot outside Azkaban for as long as he lives, but that'll do," she conceded.

Not quite ready to make that his life's goal, Harry decided to say nothing further about the topic, busying himself by taking a bite of food. "I'm sure the Aurors will do everything they can to find him," said Arthur reassuringly. "The Aurors, I understand, are working overtime trying to track down those people."

There was silence for a minute while everyone ate; Harry missed Fred's presence, as he and George would no doubt be making jokes if both were there. Harry felt like an outsider, since he'd been the only one not there for the last three days. He wondered if the others had exhausted all new conversation topics. Remembering something he'd heard at Bill's, he asked, "So, you all stayed at Muriel's. How was that?"

There was a conspicuous silence as the Weasleys exchanged looks. Finally, George said flippantly, "It was wonderful, Harry. Muriel was a pure delight, a never-ending source of charm, wit, support—"

"George," Molly interrupted warningly. With a mild shrug, George went back to his food.

"As you can gather from George's comments, it could have been better," admitted Arthur. "Muriel is, well, Muriel. But she opened her home to us during a very difficult time—"

"It was difficult, all right—"

“George!” Molly again scolded him. Ginny suppressed a giggle.

“So, the last thing we would do is say anything negative about her,” finished Arthur. “Well, most of us, anyway,” he added, with a glance at George.

“Just telling it the way it is,” said George. Before anyone could comment further, the front door opened, and in a few seconds, Bill and Fleur walked into the kitchen, Fleur with a baby in her arms. A burst of adrenaline went through Harry as he realized that he hadn’t thought about Remus and Tonks’ baby, for whom he had been designated the godfather.

“Harry, good, you are here,” said Fleur with a smile. “Would you like to see him?”

Harry stood; Fleur kissed him on both cheeks and handed him the baby. Harry thought he was cute, but looked like most babies—until he saw Teddy’s face shape change before his eyes. “Cute, isn’t it, that he can change so young,” said Fleur as Harry’s surprise was evident to all. “Not that long ago, it was only his hair.”

“He’s great, but... I feel like I don’t know what Remus and Tonks were thinking,” said Harry. “I don’t know the first thing about taking care of a baby.”

“You learn,” said Molly humorously.

“Don’t worry, Harry,” said Bill. “We know you’re not exactly in a position to do that right now, you’ve been through a lot. You need time to get yourself together. For now, Fleur and I are going to take care of him, with Mum helping us, and Andromeda’s already made it clear that she wants substantial time with him. We’ll consider him our practice baby,” he added, with a grin for Fleur.

“Yeah,” agreed George. “Mess up with him, get it right the next time.”

“We hope you will visit him, though,” put in Fleur. “Here, hold him, let him become familiar with you, so it will not be a shock when he spends more time with you later.”

The responsibility was overwhelming, Harry felt, but at least he didn't have to do anything right then. Maybe in one or two years... who knew what he might be doing then... again, he didn't want to think about it. This, too, he could put off for a while, though not indefinitely. He again wondered what possessed Remus and Tonks to make a 17-year-old a godparent of a baby when they would both be going into battle.

"Thank you, both of you," he said to Fleur and Bill, handing Teddy back to a mildly surprised Fleur. "And I will visit him, of course," he added, with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. He sat back down to resume his meal as Bill and Fleur took their seats.

"So, Bill, how was your first day back at work?" asked Arthur. "Well, half-day, anyway."

Fleur filled up Bill's plate before working on her own. "Mainly just catching up on news, or you could call it gossip. The goblins are happy that You-Know-Who's gone, but—" He stopped talking in response to a sharp look from Harry. "What?" he asked Harry in surprise.

"Harry's the 'You-Know-Who' police," joked Ron. "He wants everyone to say 'Voldemort'—see, I did it—" he added, with a grin at Harry, "or else he gets shirty with them."

Harry sighed, feeling that he had to explain himself. "I didn't mean to offend you," he half-apologized to Bill. "It's just that, I've always hated that phrase, and now that he's gone, it seems especially pointless. It's like people are still afraid of him."

"Well, I'm not," said Bill casually, showing that he hadn't taken offense. "It's just a habit, really. But, if it'll make you happy... the goblins are happy that Voldemort's gone, but now that he is, they're thinking about themselves, what they can get out of it. Rumor is that they're considering holding the Ministry responsible for everything that happened, trying to get compensation for their losses, the goblins who were killed, that sort of thing."

"I suppose they'd rather the Ministry just gave them piles of gold, rather than using it to help the Muggle-born wizards who lost everything because of Voldemort," said an irritated Hermione.

Bill shrugged. "Nobody ever said they were great humanitarians. But what particularly has them talking is your breaking into Gringotts." He made eye contact with Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "It's a good thing you didn't tell me what you were going to do, because I'd have told you that you were utterly loony. And I would've been right. You were unbelievably lucky to get out of there in one piece."

"It was Hermione's idea," said Ron.

"Very funny," she responded. "It was my plan, but I didn't see you suggesting anything better. But the Horcrux was there, so we had to go. It was as simple as that. But I guess I should have supposed they'd have some defense against Polyjuice Potion. I just couldn't think of anything better."

"What makes the story truly great," said Bill, "was riding the dragon out of there. Whose idea was that?" Ron pointed at Harry; Bill chuckled. "It was so... audacious, truly inspired. When you hear the story, it sounds like you were planning all along to do that."

"And speaking as a dragon expert," put in Charlie, "not even the most foolhardy daredevil would have tried to ride a dragon, especially bareback, with no equipment like you did."

"Well," responded Ron, "when the alternative is being captured by a bunch of angry goblins, and soon afterwards being handed over to Voldemort... I'd say that 'foolhardy' is preferable to 'hopeless.' I was quite pleased with Harry's idea." He paused deliberately for a second. "Terrified, but pleased. I mean, if you're drowning and you see a rope, you grab it. You don't wonder what it's connected to."

Bill nodded. "I can see that. But the goblins are, shall we say, not amused. In terms of the financial loss, the biggest one is the dragon itself. It's worth a huge amount of money—"

“But it was old, or at least, it looked old,” protested Ron. “It couldn’t have had much time left.”

“But they could have, and would have, had it slaughtered before it died naturally,” pointed out Bill. “I don’t know how much they’d get for it, what, Charlie, over a half million Galleons?”

“Easily,” replied Charlie. “Closer to a million.”

Bill nodded. “They’d get some profit from that, and use some to buy a new one. But maintaining a dragon is so expensive, their profit wouldn’t be all that big. But now, they’re just out more than a half million Galleons, just flew away.”

Ron pretended to sigh. “I’d feel so guilty, if only I, you know... cared.”

“Bet they care,” muttered Harry. His comment was immediately followed by an indignant Hermione’s “They should be ashamed of themselves, keeping that poor dragon locked up underground. Never to see the sun...”

“That poor dragon,” repeated George solemnly. “Not one of those phrases you hear often. Like, ‘great goblin philanthropist,’ or ‘...Muriel said shyly.’” Ginny suppressed a giggle, anticipating her mother’s reaction, which was an annoyed glance at George.

Bill picked up where he’d left off. “You’re right, Harry, they care a lot. Charlie told me that they have search parties out looking for it; they can guess where it might tend to go, and it’s hard for a dragon to hide. So, it’s still possible that they might get it back. But they’re really angry even aside from the expense. It’s a black eye for their image. Three teenagers broke into one of the highest-security vaults, took something, and escaped. It makes them look incompetent. So they might not only demand compensation, but also, Harry’s arrest.”

Ron smirked; Arthur almost choked on his food. “I’m sure Kingsley will get right on that,” muttered Arthur.

“Bill, what’s known about the reason we did it?” asked Hermione.

"It's known that you took an object, not of great value, from the vault of Bellatrix Lestrange, and that you took no money. Because Voldemort was defeated soon thereafter, most people assume that you got something you needed to defeat him. Don't worry, nobody thinks you were out for profit. But the goblins won't care about that. And they know there's no chance of the Ministry arresting you; this would be a negotiating ploy. On a strictly technical level, what you did is illegal, and punishable under wizarding law. So, this is going to be one more headache for Kingsley, one that he can't put off for long. Goblins are tough negotiators, and they have some economic power."

"I should ask them if they'd rather have Voldemort back," said Harry.

"They won't look at it that way, though they should," agreed Bill. "Who knows, maybe they'll get the dragon back, cool down, and things'll get back to normal."

"Do you think that'll happen?" asked Hermione hopefully.

"Ummm... no," responded Bill. "I was just trying to be optimistic. It could happen. But I wouldn't bet on it." Neither would I, thought Harry. If something can go wrong, especially when it's connected to me, it tends to do so.

Lunch finished; most everyone went to the living room, but Harry went upstairs to use the bathroom. Coming out, he saw Hermione in front of Ron's bedroom; she motioned him to join her. She closed the door behind her, surprising Harry. What could be so important?

She looked at him with sympathy. "How are you doing, Harry?"

He was bewildered. Was this the big thing? "Fine, why?"

She rolled her eyes. "Harry, this is me. We were constant companions for most of the past year. Do you think I can't read your face any better than that?"

"Well, then, why ask the question?" he asked impatiently.

“On the off chance that you might be honest in your answer, though I should know better than to expect that. You always keep your feelings in, you always shut people out, even me and Ron. I deserve better than that. Now, what’s wrong?”

He took a deep breath, trying not to show his annoyance. I may as well answer her, he thought, she’ll just keep after me if I don’t. “Anything I tell you is just between you, me, and Ron, okay?”

“Of course,” she said, with a wounded tone.

“He’s probably already filled you in on yesterday. But the answer to your question is, I don’t know.”

“Harry, come on, I said I wouldn’t—“

“And I said, I don’t know what the hell is wrong with me! That’s the truth!” He realized he’d raised his voice quite a bit, and tried to calm down. “It’s like, I’m not comfortable in my own skin, is the closest I can come. I don’t even understand it, so how can I explain it?”

Her expression was now one of deep concern. Having started, he didn’t stop. “I’m a bloody hero, everyone loves me. Well, except the goblins. Everyone who meets me is going to tell me how great I am. I should be used to that, it’s happened often enough. But I don’t like it any more now than I did then. I feel like I just want to shut myself off in Grimmauld Place.”

“But, Harry, you deserve that kind of praise. What you did...”

“Somehow that doesn’t help. Besides, you deserve it more than me, you saved my ass half a dozen times. But people don’t know that, and I’m sorry, but the last thing I want to do is tell everyone this story, have everyone know everything about my life because they feel entitled somehow—“

Now she raised her voice, partly to interrupt him. “I don’t want you to! I don’t care who knows what I did. I don’t need to be a hero either, you know. I just want what’s best for you.”

He calmed down, and acknowledged her words with his eyes. "Well, whatever the reason... and like I said, I don't even know what it is... but going out in public and getting praised, being with Ginny, taking responsibility for a baby, doing whatever Kingsley would have me do... I just feel like I can't face any of it. Even the things that are good... I feel like it's all too much."

She quickly moved forward to hug him; he held her, feeling her comfort, knowing how much she wanted to help him. "I'm sorry, Harry."

"It's like, you and Ron are the only ones I can talk to, or be comfortable with. I don't know why that is, either."

"Maybe you feel like we're the only ones who really know how you feel," she suggested, letting go of him and stepping back.

He grunted. "I don't see how, since I don't really know how I feel. But I see what you mean. Who knows, you could be right. I'm just bad at this sort of thing. All I can do is wait, I guess, maybe it'll change."

"I think it will," she said, obviously trying to be optimistic. "It's probably just because this all happened so recently, and your life has changed so suddenly. It's a lot to take in. Give it some time, you'll feel better."

He nodded. "I hope so." He privately doubted it, though; for some reason, it didn't seem like the kind of thing that only time would fix. "By the way, I wanted to ask you, what have you been doing for the past few days?"

"Mainly being with Ron, trying to help him deal with what happened to Fred. Also, wondering what to do about my parents."

Harry tried not to show the responsibility he felt about that, as he was sure he'd get the same response that Ron had given him. "What do you mean, what to do? I always assumed you'd lift the Memory Charm and bring them back."

"I did too, but thinking about it, it's not as simple as that," she responded, with obvious anxiety. "How are they going to feel about what I did?"

"I hope they'd think it was better than being dead."

"But they might not understand that so well. They might think I was overreacting, or that I should have let them make the decision."

"They never would have gone," Harry said. "They'd have been like, it's probably not that bad, not bad enough to uproot our lives. I know, I had to persuade the Dursleys, and they almost didn't go even though there was obvious and dire danger."

She nodded. "That's exactly why I did it the way I did. But they still might be pretty angry."

"Can't you just do it so that they thought they went to Australia because it was their dream, but it wasn't working out, so they came back here?"

"I was hoping to, but... there's only so much of that you can do before problems start developing. Confused feelings, inconsistent memories; it could even do psychological damage. I did it before because I was desperate to keep them safe, but if I do that again, it would be for the sole purpose of them not being angry with me. I don't think I can subject them to that kind of risk for that reason. I'll have to go to the library to research it."

"That reminds me, are you going back to Hogwarts?"

"I haven't decided that either, I'll have to talk to Professor McGonagall. If I did it, it would have to be that I'd go full-time next year, same as it would be with Ron if he did it." Harry couldn't help but think that Ron was a lot less likely to do this than Hermione. "I don't suppose you're going to."

Harry thought for a few seconds. "One of the problems of my little condition seems to be that I can't think much about the future, either. So, I have no idea. But it would really surprise me if I ended up doing

that.” After a few seconds of silence, Hermione suggested that they go back downstairs, and they did.

An hour later, they headed for the cemetery. It was a one-mile walk from the Weasley home; they could easily have Apparated, but they decided to walk as a group. As they walked, Hermione explained to Harry and Ron that it wasn’t considered appropriate to Apparate directly to a graveyard; one was supposed to Apparate to at least a hundred yards away, then walk the rest of the distance.

The Weasleys lived in a more rural area, so as they walked they passed plenty of trees, shrubs, and other flora. Ron occasionally pointed to a tree he’d played in as a small child, or one he’d flown a broom to near the top of in order to retrieve a flying toy, only to be punished by his parents for flying higher than he’d been allowed to. Listening to the stories, Harry wondered how his life would have been different if he’d been raised in the wizarding world. Arthur overheard, and walked near them to tell Harry and Hermione about his love of the countryside, and the long walks he and Molly used to take. They still did occasionally, he said, but of course not recently, as life had become more and more dangerous after Voldemort’s return.

Harry noticed that Ginny was walking with her mother, staying away from him, Ron, and Hermione. He felt badly, as he was sure that she would have joined them under other circumstances. He wondered how angry she was with him, or if she thought his words meant that he didn’t want to be near her at all. He would have been perfectly happy to talk to her with the understanding that any romantic relationship was on hold, but she didn’t seem to want to do that. He wished he could be what she wanted him to be, but he knew he couldn’t. It frustrated him, but more when he thought about Ginny than anyone else.

As they approached the cemetery, Harry realized that they were the first to arrive; the ceremony wasn’t supposed to start for another half hour. He assumed it was also a custom, so the bereaved family could greet others individually if they chose to, rather than all at once. Ron wandered around the graveyard, looking at tombstones; Harry wondered whether he was looking for distant relatives, or perhaps grandparents. Harry felt no inclination to look around.

After a few minutes, he started seeing people in the distance, walking in the direction of the graveyard. It turned out that they were Weasley relatives, and all greeted Molly and Arthur, then started talking to Ginny and Charlie. Harry made no move to approach them or introduce himself, staying close to Ron and Hermione.

Another person came close enough to be recognized, and Harry saw Luna Lovegood, dressed in black robes, and surprisingly, no hat of any sort. He should have known that she wouldn't wear strange headwear to a funeral, but it still seemed surprising. He remembered the wave of affection he'd felt for her when at her home, and the fact that she'd helped save his life during the Hogwarts battle. He started walking toward her, Ron and Hermione following a few steps behind.

As he approached her, he saw that she looked somber and unhappy, which was quite unusual for her. She stopped a few steps short of him, but he continued, reaching out to hug her. After holding her for a few seconds, he was startled to find her sobbing into his shoulder. I didn't think she knew Fred that well, he thought. He patted her shoulder as she continued crying.

Withdrawing from his embrace, she took his right hand in both of hers and gripped it tightly, the occasional tear still falling from her clear blue eyes. "I'm so sorry," she said, in a tone both earnest and ashamed.

He suddenly realized that this had nothing to do with Fred. "For what?"

"For... for what my father did."

Ah, thought Harry, now I understand. "He did it, Luna, not you." He noticed that behind him, Ron and Hermione had taken a few steps back and were talking to each other, appearing not to notice Harry and Luna.

She didn't look reassured. "It's so kind of you to say that," she said miserably. "But he did it for me. I never would have wanted him to. I wish he would have helped you."

He nodded. "I know."

"He just got back from Azkaban the other morning, after they let everyone out. I was so happy to see him, I was really worried about him."

She was going to continue, but he cut in with a question. "Were the dementors guarding it?"

Sniffling, she nodded. "He was in such a terrible state, I've never seen him so badly off. He was really happy to see me, but he told me what he had done... I couldn't believe it. He suffered so much in Azkaban, Harry... can you imagine it, the dementors are doing that to you all the time, and he had to live with the knowledge of what he had done. He said it kept going through his mind, over and over. He's still in a very bad way. He wanted me to forgive him, he begged me to." She looked as though she might start crying again. "He was so sad, I really wanted to, but I couldn't. I told him I loved him, that I was happy to see him, I was glad he was safe. But I couldn't say what he wanted me to say, and I felt terrible about that too."

Harry said what he thought. "A lot of people would just say they did, even if they really didn't."

She shook her head. "He always told me, even from a very young age, never to lie, even to make someone feel better. He said, if you lie, it means you don't respect them. Lying to him would be even worse than not forgiving him."

He suddenly felt he understood Luna a lot better, including her tendency to speak uncomfortable truths. "I'm curious, Luna... imagine you were in his position. He's in jail, we came to see you, to get your help. You think you can get him out of jail, out of danger, by calling the Death Eaters. Would you?"

"I've thought about that, of course," she said. "I don't think you can really know unless you're in the situation. But honestly, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't. Of course, I'd be distraught, but I just don't think I could bring myself to do that, especially since in his situation, my life wasn't

in immediate danger. He could have helped you and sent you on your way without putting me in any more jeopardy than I was in. Especially since it was you, the one who had the only real chance of beating Voldemort; handing you over was like sealing everyone's fate. But I know you wouldn't have done it, Harry. You handed yourself over to Voldemort to try to save the rest of us."

"I'm pretty sure that handing yourself over, and handing over someone you care about, are two different things," he pointed out. "I like to think I wouldn't have done what he did, but like you, I can't be absolutely sure. But I am very sorry that your father suffered so much."

"So am I."

Harry put an arm around her shoulder and steered her towards Ron and Hermione. When they reached them, Luna said, "Thank you for pretending not to listen to Harry and me. It was very kind of you."

Hermione blushed, but Ron smiled. "It's no problem." To Harry's surprise, Ron took a step forward to hug Luna as well. "And thank you for saving our lives, back at the castle."

"Yes, thank you," said Hermione sincerely, looking surprised but pleased with Ron for his gesture.

"I managed to forget about that already," said Harry, as Ron let go of Luna.

"I was glad to do it," said Luna. "I'm happy to have you as my friends."

"Even if we don't believe in Crumple-Horned Snorkacks?" joked Harry.

"Oh, you'll see one, one day," Luna said serenely. At this point, it wouldn't surprise me, thought Harry.

They slowly walked back to the main group. A few more people got closer; mostly middle-aged, Harry guessed they were friends of Arthur's from the Ministry. He also saw three young men approaching. George broke off from the main group to greet them; he knew they

were Fred and George's dormitory-mates from Hogwarts. One of them was Lee Jordan, of course, and Harry recognized the other two, but didn't know their names.

To Harry's great surprise, in the far distance he saw the Knight Bus suddenly appear. Its doors opened, and about twenty people got out. In a few minutes they were close enough to be recognized; McGonagall was at the head, followed by a group of students. He realized at once that they must all be members of Dumbledore's Army.

When they reached Harry's group, there were many greetings exchanged. Harry greeted the seventh-year Gryffindors warmly, and saw Ron and Lavender exchange awkward hellos as they met. He patted on the back an obviously still bereaved Dennis Creevey, who he had tried to console at Hogwarts after Voldemort's defeat, though not very successfully. He felt he should do what he could to help Dennis, to whom he felt responsible, as his brother was one of the two members of Dumbledore's Army who had died.

"Did you get my owl?" asked Dennis.

Knowing it was certainly in the pile of letters he hadn't bothered to look at, Harry was immediately ashamed. He nodded, immediately having the thought that he was nowhere near as honest as Luna.

"I felt bad about it," continued Dennis, by far the youngest person there, conspicuous by his small size. I told my parents that you, and all the other D.A. members would have wanted to be there, but they insisted that it should be family only."

Harry breathed an inward sigh of relief as he realized that Dennis was talking about Colin's funeral, and that he hadn't missed it by neglecting his mail. "I understood, Dennis," he said. "We all honor Colin in our hearts."

Dennis nodded. "I know. It's still really hard. But at least I know he was doing what he wanted to do, what I would have wanted to be doing. So, when are you coming back to Hogwarts?"

Dennis's question was heard by some of the D.A., whose ears perked up. Well, I can't lie about this, Harry thought. "I don't know, Dennis. I might not come back at all."

Neville stepped forward. "What? You've got to come back, Harry. You and Ron and Hermione. It wasn't the same without you."

"But we haven't been there for the whole year, Neville," Harry pointed out. "There's no way we're going to get N.E.W.T.s, it would be kind of pointless."

"That wouldn't be the point! We should finish Hogwarts together, like we started together." Neville looked adamant, and Harry could see agreement on the others' faces.

"I'm sorry, Neville," he said. "Part of me feels that way too, but... it's been a long year. Not that it hasn't been for you, too, but... I just feel like I need time to do whatever I want, or nothing at all. I can't explain it very well, I just feel it." He felt acutely uncomfortable telling them this, but he had led them, they had fought with and for him, and they deserved as much honesty as he could manage.

Nobody looked happy with this, but Harry gathered from their faces that they didn't want to argue with him. "Well, just to be on the safe side, we won't put any new people in your dormitory bed."

Not that they could anyway, thought Harry, but he understood Neville's intent. "I appreciate that, Neville. So, classes are continuing? With all the damage the castle took?"

"Repairs will begin next week," said McGonagall, suddenly appearing behind Harry. "In the meantime, with a little resourcefulness and a little magical patchwork, I believe we will get by. Mr. Potter, may I have a word with you?"

Here we go, thought Harry. The main thing he had dreaded about the funeral was that he would be around a lot of people who would talk to him, ask him to do things he might not want to do, put various kinds of pressure on him. He was accustomed to resisting such pressure, but that didn't make it feel any better; he had already been made to

feel bad about not returning to Hogwarts. He assumed McGonagall would say something similar, but he liked her, and in any case couldn't refuse to speak to her. Trying to keep resignation off his face, he nodded, and followed her to a spot out of everyone's hearing.

"So, you are not coming back to Hogwarts."

He shrugged. "You heard me say that there wouldn't be any point."

"And you heard what Mr. Longbottom said. It would do much for their spirits to have you back."

"Voldemort's dead," said Harry emotionlessly. "I think their spirits will be okay without me."

She looked at him disapprovingly, but appeared to have decided to abandon that line of discussion. "I wanted to talk to you, Mr. Potter, for two reasons. One is to suggest—" here it comes, thought Harry—"that you attend the summer intensive session for Defense Against the Dark Arts." His expression didn't change. "This would not be for the purpose of getting the N.E.W.T. per se, which I suspect you could manage right now. It would be for the purpose of completing your education in this subject, which would be a prerequisite for taking over the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor in September when the next term begins."

This got a reaction out of him. "Why?" he asked incredulously.

"Perhaps you could be more specific about the nature of your disbelief," she said dryly.

"You want me there as a symbol?" guessed Harry. "Look, he defeated Voldemort, he can teach you to be great? Most of how I beat him was stuff I had no control over, and didn't have much to do with standard Defense Against the Dark Arts anyway. I don't see why I'd be better than anyone else who knew the subject fairly well."

She seemed to be trying to summon all of her tolerance. "I am sure that Miss Granger could explain it to you, if she were listening. First of all, you have teaching experience—Dumbledore's Army. They

performed quite well in the battle; two deaths out of more than twenty is a very low casualty rate, especially compared to the rest of the combatants.” She softened her tone a little. “You may not realize it, Harry, but you not only taught them, you inspired them. They wanted to do the sort of things that you had done.”

“Which is the reason we’re here today,” said Harry bitterly, hating to be reminded.

“It was his choice to fight, as it was for all of us. You cannot blame yourself for that. I believe that we might have lost the battle for the castle if not for your teaching, never mind your individual actions. Also, I am thinking of the future. Imagine, if you will, that the next Dark threat comes along in twenty or thirty years. Who do you think will better inspire students, both former and current, to take up arms to fight the threat: Professor Harry Potter, or Professor Gilderoy Lockhart?”

Harry couldn’t quite stifle a chuckle; she smiled. “Kind of hard to argue with that,” he conceded.

“I’m sorry, Harry. I can see your reluctance, and I understand, at least somewhat. This is all very soon; I am not asking you to decide right away. May I ask, is this simply not something you think you would like to do, or is there some other reason for your reaction?”

“I think it would come under the heading of ‘some other reason,’” he said. “I would never have thought of it, but as I’ve told a few people already, I’m having a hard time thinking about the future right now.”

“Very well. The second thing I mentioned is that I am... deeply concerned about the fact that...” She lowered her voice, “you used the Cruciatus Curse when you did. I do not pretend to know what you have been through in the past year, and do not want to judge you. I have told no one else, and will not. But I personally cannot think of any situation justifying its use. If there is one, what happened that night was quite far from it. If your intent was to be chivalrous, it was appreciated, but a Stunning spell would have been more than sufficient.”

Harry was silent for a few seconds, then spoke. "I know. I think I was just really mad... not only for you, but Neville had been telling me how much torture they'd been doing... it was disgusting what they'd turned Hogwarts into."

She nodded. "I understand that, and I also understand the difference between premeditated intent and a sudden impulse. I assume that you understand, however, the irony of the notion of using torture because you are upset about torture."

"No, you're right, I don't want to become like them. I'm pretty sure I won't ever be doing that again."

She seemed satisfied with his answer. "I do want to add, however, that my offer of the teaching job is not solely for the reason I mentioned, about inspiration. You taught the D.A. well, and I have no doubt that you would do the same for all of the school's students."

He was touched by the compliment, though no more eager to accept her offer. "Thank you, Professor. I appreciate that." He thought about apologizing for his 'symbol' question, in which he had taken a less-than-respectful tone with her, but before he could decide, she had nodded and moved on. As he approached his D.A. friends, he thought, no way am I telling them what she offered me, they'd all badger me to take it. That's the last thing I need, more badgering. When they asked about McGonagall, he said only that she'd asked him about the summer sessions.

Soon a knot of older former students arrived: Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnet, Angelina Johnson, Oliver Wood, and Cho Chang. They joined the D.A. group, talking to everyone; George joined them, getting hugs from his female former Quidditch teammates. Cho walked up to Harry and gave him a hug that Harry felt was a little too enthusiastic, given how little contact they'd had over the past two years. He dearly hoped that Ginny hadn't happened to look in that direction at that time, but he couldn't do much about it. He talked to her politely for a minute, after which Hermione interrupted them with a hearty greeting for Cho that didn't seem too genuine, asking Cho what she was up to. Mentally thanking Hermione, he took the opportunity to break off and talk to Katie, Alicia, and Angelina.

Molly approached them to tell them that it was almost time for the ceremony to begin. As they walked to the gravesite, Molly steered Harry over to an old woman who Harry didn't recognize at first, but soon remembered from the wedding. "Muriel, this is Harry Potter," said Molly proudly.

"Yes, I can see that, I'm not blind yet," snorted Muriel. She eyed Harry up and down; he felt like a piece of meat being inspected. "So, you're the big hero that everyone's talking about. Funny, you don't look like a hero."

Harry nodded. "I don't feel like one, either. Kind of gormless, actually."

She looked startled for a second, then let out a loud cackle that got quite a few people looking in their direction. "You were at the wedding, weren't you!" He grinned. "That—" She interrupted herself by coughing loudly; when she was finished, she could only manage a throaty whisper. "That Ginny really has a thing for you," she continued. "Are you going to marry her?"

Molly had a look of profound embarrassment. Harry wondered if Ginny had really made some comment while staying at Muriel's, or if Muriel had heard rumors, or just guessed. He wasn't sure what to say. "I have no idea."

"Oh, come on, humor a dying old woman," she urged him, her voice gaining a little strength again.

Harry's eyebrows went high. "You're dying?"

"No, she isn't," said a frowning Molly. "Don't say things like that, Muriel, it's bad luck."

"Well, I haven't got long left," she wheezed. "No point in pretending otherwise. So, what's it going to be?" She weakly poked Harry in the chest.

Harry found that he liked something about her; even if she could be rude, she said what she thought, straight out. He'd been angry when she was saying things about Dumbledore last year, but it had turned out that she was right. He leaned over and whispered into her shriveled, spotted ear. "Two years from today, exactly. Hang in there."

Again, she cackled loudly. "Not so gormless after all!" she said approvingly, and laughed again. With a quizzical look at Harry, Molly guided Muriel toward the gravesite; Harry lent a hand with her left arm. As they walked, Harry noticed the presence of more people he hadn't noticed earlier, such as Kingsley and a few other Order members. Harry was impressed that Kingsley had made a point to come, given how busy he must have been.

The casket was ten feet behind the tombstone; what Harry guessed was almost a hundred people were gathered around the other three sides of the grave. Arthur, Bill, Charlie, Percy, George, and Ron raised their wands, and Fred's casket floated through the air and landed neatly in the bottom of the grave, with a small thud. Molly burst into sobs; Ginny put her arm around her and held her mother to her chest. Again the six men waved their wands, and the pile of dirt behind the tombstone started falling on top of the casket, and continued until the new dirt was level with the old.

George walked to face everyone, standing in front of the tombstone. "As the inheritor, I gather I'm supposed to say a few words first." He cleared his throat, then continued. "Fred knows how I feel about him, so there's no need to get into all that sort of thing. Besides, I need to leave it ambiguous, so if he comes back as a ghost I can deny it, and say that I was just going to say what a prat he was, and didn't only because I didn't want to be rude. One must cover all of one's bases, you know." No one laughed, but a glance told Harry that some people were smiling. No one should have thought that Fred Weasley's funeral would be completely without humor, he mused.

"Now, everyone who wants to say a few words about Fred should come up here and do so," George went on. "I only ask them to keep this in mind: it was often said that he and I were very similar. Like twins, you might say. So, remember that when you praise Fred, when

you say kind and generous things about him, you're doing so for me as well. Thank you."

Harry smiled, and again, he wasn't the only one. After a brief pause, Ron walked up to where George had stood. "I have a few things to say about Fred, and only Fred," he added emphatically in George's direction.

"Party pooper," George muttered.

"As I imagine a lot of older brothers do, Fred gave me quite a hard time when we were kids. He once gave me a drink that, I didn't know, would make my pee turn black." Harry stifled a giggle. "I learned from him, the hard way, about the spell that makes you burp up slugs, and the less said about the spider, the better. But he taught me a thing or two as well, and more importantly, he was there for me when I needed him. And I'm proud that he, that my whole family, fought against Voldemort. But when you do that, you take a risk, and here we are. But I'm sure he wouldn't have had it any other way."

"Except for the dying part," clarified George.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Yes, except for that. I meant—well, never mind, you know what I meant." He paused for another moment, as if considering whether he had anything else to say, then walked back to his position near the Weasleys.

Harry wanted to say something, so he decided to go next, walking up to where Ron had stood. "Fred and George—and yes, everything I say is about the both of you—never gave me the hard time they gave Ron, because I wasn't their brother, though I'm sure my cousin Dudley will never forget that Ton-Tongue Toffee they gave him." He saw a few people chuckle, including George. "My memories of them are mainly of when they helped me out. I remember in second year, when everyone thought I was the heir of Slytherin, they made fun of the idea, which made me feel better. When we played Slytherin, when Slytherin players went after me, trying to injure me, they made sure the offender paid for it, with a well-placed Bludger."

George interrupted. "It was our pleasure."

Harry smiled sadly. "I know. And before second year, they and Ron took the flying car to break me out of the Dursleys, which had become like a prison, and I got to spend a month with them that I wouldn't have otherwise. That meant a lot to me. And, of course, there were the fireworks and swamp at Hogwarts two years ago. So, they broke rules and caused havoc a lot of the time, but it was usually in the service of a kind or good goal, or just for the sake of humor, which is a good thing in itself. So, Fred, goodbye. I'll miss you. And George, I'm sure Fred would say, keep up the spirit." Harry felt emotion rise up, and fought to shut it down. He walked back to his spot, with a hug for George on the way.

Ginny was next, followed by Charlie, then Lee Jordan. Harry listened to their testimonials and memories somberly, with the occasional smile when one of Fred and George's more amusing exploits were recounted. More than twenty people ended up speaking, but Arthur and Molly did not.

After it was over, there was no sudden rush to leave; people milled about, talking quietly. The only person who seemed about to leave quickly was Muriel, whom Harry overheard saying something that sounded like, "I'll do it by myself, I said! It might take an hour, but I'll do it myself." He gathered that one also didn't Disapparate from a graveyard, and she preferred to walk the hundred meters by herself, leaving earlier than others so she wouldn't be the last one to leave the area.

Harry was standing with Ron and Hermione, when behind him, he heard Kingsley talking to Arthur and Molly. At first he couldn't help but overhear, but soon he was actively listening.

"...and I know this isn't a good time to ask, Arthur, but I thought I should do it while I'm here, and you have the family with you if you'd like to talk about it."

"What do you mean?" asked Arthur.

"I'd like you to head up the Wizarding Unity Department," said Kingsley.

There was a brief silence. Arthur asked, "Why me? I mean, I'm really not the type to be a department head." Ron started to say something, but Harry silently shushed him.

"That's because," said Kingsley wryly, "usually you have to kiss a lot of rings and do high-level people a lot of favors before you can get a position that has Undersecretary rank, as this one does. I'm trying the novel concept of filling the jobs with the best people, as opposed to those who have accumulated the most political chits. I may only be the temporary Minister, but I'm going to govern as if I were permanent. You fought against Voldemort, your record is above reproach, and your sympathy for Muggles and Muggle-borns is well-known; they'll trust you to look out for their interests. There's no one better for the job."

"Well... thank you, Kingsley," said an obviously affected Arthur.

"But since you're temporary," asked Molly, "couldn't Arthur just be removed by the next Minister?"

Arthur answered before Kingsley could. "No. Undersecretaries and department heads can't be unilaterally removed by Ministers; it's one of the few things a Minister can't do by himself. There would just be chaos otherwise."

"They could cut his budget, make his life difficult, but that would be about it," added Kingsley. "And as for being temporary, the Council has told me that I may yet be made permanent. They only made me temporary because I'm an unknown quantity politically; I could be a political idiot, for all they know. I probably have about six months, and if I'm doing all right then, they'll make it permanent. But in any case, I'm going to do what I think is right, not what I think they think I should do. So, Arthur, would you like time to think about it?"

Arthur sighed lightly. "It's a big responsibility, probably a lot of late nights."

"I know. I know this isn't anything you've aspired to, and that you've always been happy in your quiet, overlooked niche. And Merlin knows

you've already done quite a lot for the country. But I don't want someone who doesn't give a damn about Muggle-borns, or someone who's looking to advance, in this job. We need you."

There was a silence; Harry imagined that Arthur and Molly were looking at each other, to see what the other thought. "Well, there's nothing for it, then, is there," said Arthur, with both pride and resignation. "Of course, I'll do it, Kingsley."

"Thank you, Arthur. And you too, Molly, since this won't be easy for you either. Arthur will be written about in the Prophet, and probably criticized from time to time, no doubt by 'anonymous Ministry sources.'"

"If anyone tries to hurt Arthur, I'll remind them of what I did to Bellatrix Lestrange," joked Molly.

Arthur and Kingsley chuckled. "You may need to," said Kingsley. "Well, then, I'll see you later at the Ministry. We'll still be doing group work, but we'll talk about the structure of the department, priorities, and staffing. It may take a few days, but we want to get it up and running as soon as possible. Those people need help."

"They'll get it," said Arthur. Harry heard no more speaking; he turned a little, and saw that Kingsley had walked off. He guided Ron and Hermione a few steps away.

"Wow, Dad'll be an Undersecretary!" marveled Ron. "That's a really high position. A lot higher salary, too."

"I think it's safe to say that that wasn't the reason he took the job," pointed out Hermione with a slightly chiding tone. "It's obviously going to be a tough job, but knowing your father, he couldn't say no to the opportunity to help people, especially those who need it so much."

"I knew that," said Ron defensively. "I was just saying, there are good points about it too. My family's never had much money, you may remember."

Hermione looked annoyed, but didn't respond. After a short silence, she changed the topic. "I thought both of your speeches were good."

"Thanks," said Ron. "It was tough to know what to say. It just... it feels wrong, you know? Like he should still be here, making his usual jokes."

"I feel bad," said Hermione, "because I was always criticizing them, giving them a hard time."

"They didn't hold that against you, you know," said Ron, putting an arm around her shoulder. "They knew you liked them." She leaned her head against his shoulder as they walked on, in silence.

A minute later Kingsley caught up to them and asked them to stop for a minute. "I just wanted to make sure you three will be there for the award ceremony the day after tomorrow. It'll be in Diagon Alley at 1 p.m." Harry nodded his assent.

"Why us?" asked Hermione. "Are we going to present it to him? Or did you just think we'd like to be there?"

"I'd think you'd want to be there, as you and Ron are also getting awards," said Kingsley. "All three of you are getting the Order of Merlin, First Class."

Harry was surprised at the astonishment on Ron and Hermione's faces. "Us too?" asked Ron in disbelief.

"I should hope so," said Harry emphatically. "It would be a huge understatement to say that I couldn't have done it without you, both of you. If I deserve it, then you do too."

"But Harry did much more than we did, he's the one who beat Voldemort," pointed out Hermione. "Shouldn't he get a better one than us, like he gets First class, we get Second?" Ron shot her an accusatory glance, clearly hoping she would backtrack from that idea.

"You both deserve First class," said Kingsley, to Ron's relief. "I agree that Harry deserves even higher, but there really isn't any higher

award. Well, there is, there's Honored Citizen status, but it's usually near the end of a person's career. I suspect Harry thinks that this'll do for now."

"Yeah, I'd say so," said Harry sarcastically. "But I'm glad for you guys, you really do deserve it. And thank you, Kingsley. A lot of Ministers wouldn't have thought of something like that. They'd have only thought of it, like Scrimgeour, as an excuse to stand next to me in public."

"Well, I will be doing that," Kingsley responded with a wry smile. "The difference is, I hope, that I'm worthy to do so."

Harry sighed. "Obviously—"

"I know, I'm just tweaking you. Anyway, you three, come to my office a half hour early. I or someone else will talk to you, fill you in on how it goes. Until then..." He nodded at them and walked off.

"Order of Merlin, First Class!" Ron marveled to Harry and Hermione after Kingsley was out of hearing range. "I can't believe it!"

"Thank you, Harry," said Hermione. To his surprised expression, she added, "for saying we deserved it."

He shrugged. "Well, you do. But at the same time, I feel like everyone who fought at Hogwarts should get one. They made it possible."

"There's only so many awards they can give out," Hermione pointed out. "Ron and I were lucky to get them, obviously we weren't expecting it. Probably it's because we were so close to you, and they knew that."

"Well, I'm just glad that you guys will be up there with me," said Harry. "It feels right, after all we've been through together. Also, I won't feel so alone up there."

Ron clasped Harry's shoulder as they walked. "Glad we could help," he said humorously.

Harry suddenly felt a cool breeze, which he dismissed as an anomaly until it got a little stronger. "Hey, doesn't it seem a little—"

He cut himself off as he realized what it was, faster than others, no doubt due to his long experience with them. He whipped out his wand, instantly on high alert. He wanted to make sure he wasn't imagining it, and within two seconds, his fears were confirmed; he felt that awful, familiar feeling of oppressive doom. "Expecto Patronum!" he shouted, thinking about his victory over Voldemort.

To his surprise, nothing happened. As Ron and Hermione got their wands out and did the spell, he tried again, thinking about kissing Ginny, and failed again. Frustration and adrenaline flowed through him; this should be easy. Ron and Hermione were holding the dementors off, but Harry didn't give up. He tried to calm himself and focus hard on a memory that had always worked for him: winning the Quidditch Cup in third year. The pearly white stag burst out of his wand and started chasing dementors.

A quick glance told Harry that there were mourners scattered all over; he hoped they would be in groups enough that no one would be vulnerable. There were dementors everywhere; it was the most Harry had seen at one time since third year, and perhaps ever. Out of immediate danger as the dementors near the three of them retreated, Harry looked around. "Over there! Come on!"

He ran for a pair of trees, one with a very thick trunk. At least three dementors were around the bigger tree; he couldn't see a person, but he knew there must be one. About five yards away, some of the D.A. members were fighting off dementors. "Dennis!" shouted Parvati, as she fought off dementors with a tiger Patronus.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione all shot their Patronuses at the tree, and four dementors quickly scattered. Behind the tree he saw Dennis Creevey, flat on his back, motionless. "Oh, God," moaned Harry, as he and Hermione knelt over Dennis. "Harry, we've got to move him," said Hermione urgently. "There are too many of them, everyone's under attack."

Praying that Dennis was merely unconscious, Harry pulled him to a sitting position, then pulled him up by his arms. "I'll take him," said Ron, and Harry helped Ron heave Dennis over his shoulder. "You'll have to cover me—"

"No problem," said Harry.

"Over there!" shouted Hermione. "Kingsley's saying something!"

They ran again, slower now to let Ron keep pace, and soon they were with most of the D.A. "Kingsley wants us over there!" Seamus said loudly. Seamus, Dean, and Lavender stayed with Harry, Ron, and Hermione; the other D.A. members were further out in front. They ran a few steps, and suddenly the air felt cold again, and Harry felt despair crushing him. He cast the spell, again thinking of Quidditch, and with the help of the others, ten dementors fell back.

The group ran again, keeping a close watch for more attacks, and soon they had reached a large group. "Everyone move together, nobody gets left behind," shouted Kingsley. "We move as a group." Kingsley led the way, walking in the direction of the Burrow, briskly but not too fast.

They made slow progress, partly due to the fact that those at the rear had to look behind them frequently to make sure they weren't snuck up on. After a few minutes, Charlie, Percy, and three Weasley cousins that Harry hadn't met rejoined the group. "We got them," Percy said to Arthur, who nodded. Harry surmised that the three had been cut off from the main group, and Percy and Charlie had gone to retrieve them.

Another minute later, Bill and Fleur fell in with the group. Much in the same way that Ron was carrying Dennis, Bill was carrying Muriel. Harry's heart sank as he remembered that Muriel had headed off early, and so had probably been alone when the dementors attacked.

"Is she okay?" Molly asked Bill.

Bill shook his head. "I think she's dead. She's not breathing."

Harry and Ron exchanged a look of shock. Harry couldn't understand why she would be dead; dementors sucked the soul out, but didn't kill the victim. Maybe she was attacked and had a heart attack before she could be Kissed, thought Harry. If she's dead, I hope that's how it happened.

As they moved on, the only words spoken were the occasional shouts of warning, followed by many echoes of the spell's incantation. Finally the Burrow was in view, and the dementors suddenly attacked again, en masse. Harry again contributed his Patronus to the large pack of them—he guessed that at least half of those present could do one, maybe more—and the dementors were no match for them, though a half dozen of their party were knocked down by the forceful attack. Helped back up by their comrades, they continued on.

The party had to repel two more such attacks before they reached the Burrow. Harry wondered what they were going to do; the Burrow couldn't hold a hundred people.

When they reached the front yard, Kingsley spoke loudly. "I'd like five Weasleys to go into the house first, stand near the fireplace. Then, those who can't do a Patronus, you go into the house, use the fireplace, and go to the Atrium at the Ministry. It'll be safe there; stay there until you get more information. I don't know, but attacks could be happening elsewhere, and you have to be sure that wherever you go is safe." Arthur, Molly, Bill, Percy, and Ginny went inside, and people started filing in after them.

"After that, Professor McGonagall, you take the fireplace to Hogsmeade, and we'll send the students after you. Then, there should be enough room in the house for everyone."

Cho approached Ron. "Ron, give him to me. I'll take him to St. Mungo's, they'll find out what's happened to him."

In his surprise, Ron hesitated. "Why you?"

Annoyed, she reached for Dennis, giving Ron a 'don't waste my time' look. "As I was telling Hermione, I'm taking the training course to be an assistant Healer. They know me." Ron nodded, and helped move

Dennis as she carried him over her shoulder. She turned and immediately joined the people heading into the front door of the Burrow.

Harry turned to Ron and Hermione. "Are people going to be safe in their houses?"

"Yes," said Hermione, looking at Cho carry Dennis away, the worry clear on her face. "Dementors can't go through solid objects, so if your door is closed, you're okay. Most windows wouldn't be big enough, though of course it's better to keep them closed, to be on the safe side. But just to be extra safe, people should cast a Patronus in their homes and let it run around. I don't think they could get into Grimmauld Place, but you should do it when you get back."

"Why did they attack, anyway?" asked Ron.

"Maybe after Voldemort died, they were at loose ends, and just figured they'd attack anything they wanted," suggested Harry.

"But they didn't do these kind of attacks a few years ago, before You-Know—I mean, before Voldemort came back. Why now and not then?"

Hermione moved towards them and lowered her voice. "Because, I'd bet, Kingsley didn't make the same deal with them that Fudge and the others did. In return for their cooperation, we give them a constant supply of wizards to feed off of: the prisoners in Azkaban. What Fudge and the others allowed is morally wrong, you know that. Even if they're criminals, they shouldn't have to suffer like that. And innocent people get put in prison—"

"Sirius, I know," interrupted Harry.

"Not only him, Hagrid too, if only for a short time. But you see the point. So, if Kingsley didn't make the same bargain—"

"They've got nothing better to do than attack who they want," Ron finished.

“Can we stop them?” asked Harry.

She shook her head. “Only with Patronuses, and that’s only temporary.”

“Dementors can’t be killed?”

“No,” said Hermione unhappily. “Which is part of the reason the Ministry always made this deal with them. This attack could be seen as a form of pressure, to try to make Kingsley let them go back to Azkaban, to have the same arrangement as before they joined Voldemort.”

They fell silent as they watched more people file into the Burrow, as fast as people could go through the fireplace. Harry wondered what he would do if he were Minister, and found that he wasn’t sure. Again, the thought occurred to him that he wouldn’t want Kingsley’s job.

The three of them were among ten remaining outside when suddenly, for the first time since they reached the Burrow’s yard, the dementors made another run at them. They cast their spells, but outnumbered as they were, three were knocked to the ground, including Hermione. Alerted by those near the door, ten people inside ran out, contributing their Patronuses, and the dementors retreated one last time. Everyone went inside, with Kingsley closing the door behind them.

A few minutes later, only Weasleys remained in the Burrow, along with Harry and Hermione. Arthur and Percy accompanied Kingsley back to the Ministry, while Bill, Fleur, and Charlie returned to their homes. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and George sat in the living room and talked, though after not too long a time George got up and went to his room upstairs. Harry could understand why he wanted to be alone.

Ron mentioned that Dennis hadn’t moved at all in the time he’d been holding him, expressing the fear that they hadn’t rescued him in time. Harry tried to suppress the idea that his delay in getting his Patronus up had contributed to Dennis’s fate. He knew it wasn’t really true, but couldn’t help thinking it.

The mention of Dennis reminded Harry of something, and he excused himself from the Burrow, saying there was something he had to do. Arriving at Grimmauld Place, he sent a precautionary Patronus through the home, but as he expected, there was nothing there. He went to the living room and looked at the pile of mail, which had increased since he'd left. He looked through it, found the one from Dennis, and opened it, again feeling guilty that he'd neglected it earlier.

It contained the same information Dennis had referred to earlier, but that was not all. The last paragraph read, "I wanted to say that it was an honor to be in your group, and we all hope you come back to Hogwarts soon. We feel safer with you around. Sincerely, Dennis." Sitting in a chair at the desk, Harry closed his eyes, put his head in his hands, and shook his head at the bitter irony contained in the last sentence. Voldemort might be gone, but all was not well. Kingsley was right; things didn't end neatly with everyone living happily ever after. Sighing, he picked up the pile of letters and started going through them one by one.

* * * * *

Next:

Chapter 3, Order of Merlin, First Class: Disregarding the serious danger the now-unleashed dementors present, Harry goes for a fly alone, causing Ron and Hermione to fear for his safety and question his judgment. Even being presented with society's highest honor can't cheer him up, especially when he discovers Hermione had paid a higher price to stay with him last year than she had let on.

From Chapter 3:

"Earlier today, she received society's highest honor," said Pinter quietly. "She's a public person now."

"And this is how we thank her, by opening up her most personal problems for people to gossip about," said Harry bitterly. "Do you know, Mr. Pinter, why I haven't talked to the media, why I won't talk about what happened, what I went through in the past year? Because

it's my life, and I don't want it splashed on the front pages, for people to read and think they know who I am, when they don't. It's for exactly this kind of reason. People say, why doesn't Potter talk to the press? They should be written about, then they might not wonder."

Chapter 3

Order of Merlin, First Class

Things didn't seem better in the morning. His breakfast was waiting for him in the morning, along with the Prophet. The headline read, in large, bold letters, "Rampaging Dementors!" Reading, he quickly discovered that the attack after Fred's funeral had been far from the only one of the day. They had attacked several wizarding villages, mostly focusing on small groups or people who were alone.

Even more surprising, they had attacked Azkaban en masse. There were only six guards at the time, who had been no match for the one-hundred-plus dementors. All six were rendered soulless. Even more surprising was that the dementors also sucked the souls from the thirty-two current inmates, who, being wandless, could not defend themselves. Harry wondered if they had not recognized that these were people who had been on their side a short time ago, or if they simply hadn't cared. In any case, he was shocked. In addition to those at Azkaban, thirty-six people had lost their souls yesterday. Harry couldn't help but feel that, sensationalistic as it sounded, the headline was not an exaggeration.

Interviewed in the Prophet, Kingsley wasted no time blaming the attacks on the Voldemort-controlled government, saying that the losing side had no doubt encouraged the dementors' attacks, and repeated that any Death Eaters or sympathizers had to be captured as soon as possible.

A few editorials echoed Kingsley's line, but one placed the blame squarely on him, saying that he should have recognized the danger before it happened, and taken whatever steps to prevent it that previous governments had taken. "The Minister's job is to protect the people," the editorial concluded, "and in this respect, Kingsley Shacklebolt has failed. We urge the Council of Elders to reverse its well-intentioned mistake, and place in power someone who knows how things are done, not a political novice."

Harry was angry at the accusation against Kingsley, even though the other two editorials hadn't attacked him. He was a little surprised that

none of them had explicitly mentioned the quid pro quo deal that previous governments must have made with the dementors to prevent such attacks, but then, neither had Kingsley.

There was a separate article on the attack after Fred's funeral, suggesting a political motivation for the attack, since both Harry and Kingsley were there. Harry's heart sank as he read that as he feared, Dennis's soul had fallen victim to the dementors. On the other hand, he thought angrily, Dolores Umbridge had suffered the same fate, so at least something good had come of it. Too bad it can't only be the people who deserve it.

Inside the paper, on page five, was an article about the goblins and their grievances against the Ministry. It said that in the morning, the goblin leaders planned to meet with Ministry representatives, but were insulted by the relatively low rank of those sent to meet them, and decided to air their grievances and demands to the media directly. They demanded to be paid no less than five million Galleons in compensation for 'lives, treasure and dignity' lost during the previous government's reign, and an additional one million specifically for damage caused by Harry and his friends' escape from Gringotts. They further demanded 'the arrest and conviction of those responsible.' Well, Bill was right, thought Harry. Greedy bastards. I save them from Voldemort, and this is the thanks I get.

An hour later, mail started arriving, and this time he looked at it promptly. Most of it continued to be fan mail, though there were a few letters from D.A. members. One was from Neville, which included an earnest request to reconsider not returning to Hogwarts, and the most recent news. McGonagall had made Neville Head Boy, and Padma Patil was Head Girl. In the wake of the dementor attack, she had forbidden flying, and students couldn't go outside at all without special permission. Reconstruction, she had announced at dinner, would have to wait until the dementor situation was settled. Neville and other D.A. members had been enlisted to make sure as many people as possible knew how to do a Patronus. Harry sent him a quick note in return, thanking him for the letter and telling him he would do well teaching the Patronus, and saying he would welcome further updates.

Another was from Cho, who told him about Dennis's condition, and to Harry's surprise, mentioned their previous relationship. She had written, "You seemed uncomfortable talking to me yesterday, and I wondered if it was because of Ginny. So I wanted to let you know that there's someone I'm seeing, and I have no designs on you. I'd simply like to be your friend, like the others in the D.A. If I'm misunderstanding you, or if you have anything you'd like to say, I'd be happy to hear from you." Harry wasn't sure how to respond, so he sent back a quick response saying he was sorry if he'd been rude, and thanking her for the information.

Just as he finished with the mail, a late arrival came. It was in a very official-looking envelope, white with purple trim on the edges. On the outside it read, 'From the Office of the Minister of Magic.' He opened it and found a letter, apparently written by an assistant, informing him that the award ceremony would now be held in the Ministry Atrium, but that Kingsley still wanted them to arrive at 12:30. Guess it makes sense, thought Harry, not to have it out in the open air. People wouldn't come anyway, nobody's going to want to set foot outside now.

Well, he thought sardonically, what should I do today? It felt strange to have to ask the question. In his whole life, neither at Hogwarts nor at the Dursleys', there had never been a real choice. Nor, he felt, was there really one now. I don't want to go back to Hogwarts, and I don't want to go out in public. He looked out the window at the clear blue sky. I should fly, he thought. That always makes me feel better. Oh, yeah, the dementors. Well, screw it. I'm doing it anyway, to hell with them. I have a Patronus, and a Firebolt. I can outrun them if there are too many.

He Summoned his Firebolt and headed for the front door. He had a reflex to tell Kreacher where he was going, but he realized that of course he didn't need to. He opened the door and stepped into the sunlight, which felt wonderfully warm on his face, but not too warm; he estimated that it was in the low seventies, with a mild breeze. Perfect weather, he thought, deliberately breathing in the clean spring air. It occurred to him that he'd had plenty of chances to be out in the fresh air in the past year, running all over the countryside with Ron and Hermione, but this felt different. There was nothing he had to do,

nowhere he had to be, no responsibility hanging over his head... no death to walk off to. The last thought surprised him. Why am I thinking about that? That's over, done with.

He refocused on the sky, which contained only a few light streaks of white so thin they could barely be called clouds. He knew he couldn't fly where he was—too many non-magical houses were nearby. He needed open space. He Disapparated, and appeared in an open area in Hogsmeade, one he knew was usually not full of people. He looked around, and was surprised: there was no one around at all, no one outside. He could see the main street from where he was—the spot was significant to him because it was where he'd thrown snowballs at Malfoy from under his Invisibility Cloak—and nobody was there, either. There was an ominous air to it, like a ghost town.

Harry didn't feel particularly spooked, however. Maybe I've faced dementors enough times not to be scared of them, he thought. He mounted his broom, kicked off from the ground, and soared into the air.

It had been too long since he'd been on a broom. It felt exhilarating, the wind in his hair, the feeling of freedom. Soaring over Hogsmeade, he lost himself in the sensation, though he kept his wand between his fingers as he gripped the shaft of the broom, ready to use it in an instant. After a few minutes he looked down as he flew, and could see almost all of Hogsmeade. Not a single person could be seen anywhere outside.

He flew over Hogwarts, but not too low; he didn't want to be seen, and have people think he was coming back. He felt saddened as he saw the castle from the outside for the first time since the battle. It was still very recognizable, but had taken substantial damage. In a way, though, he felt proud, because the castle was still there, like the people who had stayed to defend it. As he knew from Neville to expect, no one could be seen outside the castle.

He turned left, heading to the Forbidden Forest. At a height of about two hundred feet, he wondered if he'd see Grawp if he looked closely enough, but he couldn't. Was Grawp in danger from dementors?

Harry hoped not; giants were fairly magic-resistant. In any case, Hagrid would make sure he was all right.

Harry moved the broom handle up, and ascended at a 45-degree angle, keeping it up for several minutes, again exhilarated by the sensation. Finally he leveled off, estimating his altitude at 5,000 feet but realizing he had no real idea. They should make a broom that has an altimeter, he thought absently. He flew at this altitude for a half hour, enjoying the feeling and the view. It was the best he'd felt since... a long time, maybe a year. Of course he'd felt very good after defeating Voldemort, but that was more a relief than happiness. This was happiness, sheer sensory pleasure, and he reveled in it.

Finally, he began to think he'd been out long enough, and started slowly making his way down. Passing Hogwarts again on the way down, he cruised over Hogsmeade at a few hundred feet, doing a quick pass out of curiosity, to see if anyone was now out and about. For a minute he again saw no one, then passing over a residential area, saw what looked like a child hanging from a branch of a very large tree in the front yard of a large house. Surprised, he descended somewhat to make sure.

Before he could see anything new, he saw four or five dementors glide toward the tree. Adrenaline powering him, he suddenly pushed his broom to full speed. He saw a boy twenty feet up the tree, both arms around a branch; another was halfway up, and a girl was on the ground. "Tommy, get down from there!" she shouted frantically.

He was ten seconds away, but the dementors were already there. The girl screamed for a second, then fell to the ground and was silent. Two dementors converged on each boy. He prayed that the boys would hang on for another few seconds... almost there... the boy higher in the tree silently let go and fell... he heard a woman shout from inside the house...

"Expecto Patronum!" he shouted, again remembering winning the Quidditch Cup in third year. The stag flew out of his wand and chased the nearest dementor as he raced toward the boy, leaning as far as he could on his broom and grabbing the boy by the shirt collar a few feet from the ground. He frantically tried to slow down and direct his

Patronus at the same time, sending it toward the second boy's attackers as he too fell. Farther away than he wanted to be due to the momentum of his broom, he let the first boy down and had to race back to near the trunk, catching the second one with both arms. Turning to check on the girl, he found that his Patronus was already making a run at the dementor hovering over her as two women, one middle-aged and one older, raced out of the house. He stood near the girl, making sure that the children were in no imminent danger.

The younger woman screamed as a dementor came up behind her; Harry's stag galloped over to push it away. The older woman, having almost reached Harry, turned as the younger one screamed, obviously shocked. "Quick, we need to get them into the house!" Harry shouted at her.

The older woman picked up Tommy, who had been sitting on the ground after Harry had let go of him. Harry dismounted from his broom and said to the child he was holding, "Can you walk?" Harry got no response from the disoriented child, which he took as a 'no,' and continued carrying him, now with the broom in the left hand and his wand in the right. Still looking around for more dementors, he and the older woman each used one hand to pick up the girl, and headed for the front door. The younger one was able to stagger in after them.

"Oh, Merlin's beard, that was horrible... thank you so much..." said the older woman, who was slim, with dyed brown hair, and in her early sixties.

Harry realized that only that woman had escaped the direct effect of the dementors. "Do you have any chocolate?" he asked urgently, still breathing heavily from the effort he'd expended.

She was clearly dumbfounded. "Any what?"

"Chocolate," he repeated. "It helps people recover from the dementors' effects. They should have some as soon as possible." The woman scurried away, returning very quickly with a very large bar. "Great," he said. "Break off big pieces, make sure they all have some." She did, and he helped her give it to the younger woman and

the children. To Harry's great relief, all ate, which meant that no souls had been taken. But it had been close.

"Thank you... I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"I'm Harry Potter. And you?"

She gaped; in her shock, she ignored his question. "Harry Potter," she breathed. "I thought you looked like him..." She trailed off, speechless, then suddenly recovered. "I'm sorry, I'm Melinda Bagginsworth, this is my daughter Lucia, and this boy," she gestured to Tommy, "and the girl are my grandchildren. The other one is a friend, staying here while his parents are working."

Harry and Melinda looked over at Lucia, who was sobbing. "It was my fault... I turned my back for a few minutes, I should have watched more carefully... they almost died..."

Harry saw that she'd eaten only a small piece of chocolate. "Ma'am, please eat the chocolate. It'll help." She appeared not to have heard him, continuing to cry. "Lucia!" he shouted. "Eat the chocolate!"

She stopped sobbing, and looked at him in shock. "You're Harry Potter!"

"Yes, I am. Now please, eat the chocolate." Still shocked, she started doing so. He looked around and saw that the children had all almost finished theirs.

"What were you doing outside?" asked Melinda.

"Having a fly. I just needed to get out for awhile."

"But the dementors..." she gasped, as if unable to believe what he'd said.

"It's no problem. I've had to fight them off a half dozen times," he assured her. "I can handle them. Anyway, I should really be going—"

"Don't you need any chocolate?" asked a concerned Melinda.

"No, I'm fine, thanks." He looked at the children, sitting together on the floor, clearly starting to feel a little better. "Now, you three, don't go outside again. It's very important." They nodded earnestly, saying nothing, but all had very frightened expressions; it reminded him of his own experiences. "When I was first attacked by a dementor, I was thirteen, not so much older than you are now. It was pretty scary, they bring up bad memories. But you'll be better soon."

He headed for the door. "I'm going to check the neighborhood, see if anyone else is outside. Don't worry, I'll make sure none get in."

Lucia walked to the door. "I... I can't thank you enough."

Harry shook his head. "It's okay. Just... lots of people have helped me. Just help someone else if you can, if you get the chance." He cast his Patronus, opened the door as little as possible, and slipped out. The dementors failed to appear again. Harry mounted his broom and returned to the air.

He flew for another fifteen minutes at a hundred feet. To his relief, there were no more children playing. He flew to the spot to which he'd Apparated, and thought about what to do next. After a few minutes, he decided to go to the Burrow, talk to Ron and Hermione, maybe stay for lunch. He Apparated to the Burrow's front lawn and walked through the front door.

To his surprise, it appeared to be empty. There was no one in the living room, or the kitchen... "Anyone home?" Harry called out.

"Up here," shouted a voice that Harry recognized as George's, though, he thought with sadness, before he wouldn't have been sure which one it was. He climbed the stairs and went to the room that used to belong to Fred and George. George was lying on the bed. "Hi," said Harry.

"Hi, Harry," said George. Harry expected him to be sad, but it was more like he was bored, which Harry could understand. Sometimes, you needed to just not do anything.

“Where is everyone?”

“Let’s see... Mum’s shopping, and practically everyone else is at the Ministry. Dad and Perce work there, of course. Dad asked Ron and Hermione to come in and help him. She’s helping him out with useful spells and her natural sense of organization; he wants her to help him set up the department in a way that cuts out as much red tape as possible.”

Harry nodded, impressed; it was the kind of challenge that Hermione would sink her teeth into. “And did Ron go to keep her company?”

George chuckled. “Yeah, not really his thing. No, Dad wanted him for something else: to deal with the Muggle-borns they’re supposed to be helping. There’s a lot of them who are now homeless because of the last government, and people like Umbridge, and many of those went to the Atrium to avoid dementors, like a shelter. Ron’s job is to be Dad’s connection to them. Ron’s supposed to talk to them, find out their situations, what they need, what their problems are.”

“Why Ron, and not a Ministry worker?” asked Harry.

“Ron asked the same thing,” said George. “Dad said it’s because especially in the beginning, he needs people he can really trust, people who he knows will do things for the right reason. Also, because of helping you, Ron’s got a fairly high profile right now. Dad figures that’ll be helpful; people may talk to Ron and have confidence in him more than some nameless Ministry drone.”

Again, Harry was impressed; it made sense. He was a little sad, though, because he’d been hoping to talk to Ron and Hermione over lunch. “Ginny?”

“She went back to Hogwarts. You didn’t know?”

Mildly annoyed with himself, Harry shook his head. “Of course, I should have realized, she’s only a sixth year. She was just here...”

“For the funeral, yeah,” George agreed. “So, it’s only me.”

“Did your mother tell you that you should get back to your shop?” asked Harry.

George chuckled. “You know her well enough, I guess. Yeah, she did, but really, there’d be no point. Our shop doesn’t have its own fireplace, and the Ministry’s telling people to only travel by fireplace for now. So, nobody’ll be going to the shop anyway. There’s owl-order stuff to do, but I haven’t really felt up to it.”

“Filthy layabout,” said another voice suddenly, startling both Harry and George. “I always knew you’d amount to nothing without me.” Fred’s ghost rose up from under the bed, facing George with a wide smile.

George’s eyes lit up with delight. “You bloody wanker!” he shouted happily. “I thought you’d done a runner on me. Why’d you wait so long?”

“Advice from the pearly white set—“

“Bugger the pearly white set, you should have come sooner! Since when do we listen to what anyone else says, anyway?”

“You’re right, sorry about that,” agreed Fred. “And hello, Harry, I’m glad you didn’t end up joining me beyond the veil.”

Harry understood that he should pretend it was his first time to see Fred since he died. “Hi, Fred. It’s really good to have you back.”

“So,” said Fred, turning back to George, “are you going to get off your pimplly behind and deal with those customers patiently waiting for their goods?”

“They’ll wait a few hours longer,” said George. “Tell me all about it, what it’s like.”

Fred launched into roughly the same story he’d told Harry; Harry sat and listened, happy for George that Fred was back. He had a feeling that George would be sending out owls by the end of the day.

* * * * *

Harry spent the next few hours at the Burrow, first with George and Fred, then with them and Molly, who was shocked to see her son back as a ghost, but obviously pleased to see him. He returned to Grimmauld Place in the mid-afternoon, and started to read one of the books Kreacher had brought him. He also tried out the bottomless bag he'd had Kreacher buy, which was similar to Hermione's, though not identical. Unlike hers, it had voice-activated compartments, so one could put different items into different parts of the bag.

After eating dinner, he checked the mail again, finding this time a letter from Xenophilius Lovegood. It read,

Dear Mr. Potter,

This may be the most difficult letter I have ever written. I am very ashamed of what I did to you and your friends, what I tried to do. Luna told me about your conversation yesterday, so I know you understand my motivations. I also know that you deliberately stayed long enough for the Death Eaters to see you, placing your lives at risk for mine, even after I betrayed you as I did. I feel all the more shamed, knowing that. You very likely saved my life.

I did my best to support you, but I could not bring myself to sacrifice what was most precious to me in order to do so. Luna tells me that you walked to what you thought was your death to protect our society. I am sure I could not do that, and my respect for you and your actions is boundless. Especially from someone who did what you did, I have no business asking for forgiveness. Even so, I write in part to apologize most humbly, and in part to say that I hope that one day you may be able to forgive me, as I hope my daughter will. She is now back at Hogwarts, in the company of those whom she can respect. I would ask you this directly, but I cannot face you. I can barely face my daughter.

Yours most sincerely and apologetically,

Xenophilius Lovegood

Harry sighed and closed his eyes. The man was clearly suffering, and Harry had no wish for him to do so. But, like Luna, he couldn't give Xenophilius what he wanted. He got a piece of paper, then sat in front of it for over half an hour, trying to think of what to say.

Dear Mr. Lovegood,

I'm not sure I know what to say. Luna told me that you told her never to lie, and I respect that, so I won't lie to you. I could forgive you if it was just me and the others. But we were trying hard to save wizarding society from Voldemort, and your actions almost stopped that. If you had been successful, you might have your daughter, but you'd be living in a society that wouldn't be worth living in. It's for that reason that I can't say that I forgive you.

I will say this: you were in a terrible situation, and we all make mistakes in really bad situations. I know I have. I will also say that what you told us that day was the truth, and it was vital information to us. It helped us understand Voldemort's motivations and actions, and we might not have succeeded without it. It may have been by accident, but you did help us. I don't know if that makes you feel any better. I hope it does.

I'll also say that you raised a terrific daughter; I consider her a close friend. To the extent that you had anything to do with that, and it must at least be some, you should be proud of that.

Sincerely,

Harry Potter

Harry knew it might not help much, but it was the best he could do. He honestly didn't blame Xenophilius; he knew it had to be a terrible choice, to have to choose what was best for everyone over the welfare of a loved one, one who was confined and no doubt suffering. But Harry knew that were he in Xenophilius's position, he would have asked himself and the others for help in some kind of plan to break his daughter free. Yet Xenophilius regretted his choice; Harry wondered what it was that made some people in that position choose one way, and some, another.

McGonagall's job offer popped into his mind for the first time since the funeral. He had reflexively shut her down, and he still didn't want to think about the future, but he had to admit to himself that the idea had some appeal. He liked the subject, and he liked Hogwarts. With some study he could get up to speed on the subject enough to teach it, and after defeating Voldemort, he suspected that he'd be respected by students, despite his young age. But his mind slammed shut on any serious consideration of the idea.

Why is that, he thought. Why am I so unwilling to think about the future? About this, about Ginny... I was even relieved that Arthur didn't try to get me to help out at the Ministry with Ron and Hermione. I don't want anyone to expect anything of me, I don't want to make any commitments. Okay, that's often been the case with me, but this feels different. I feel like something about myself has changed, but I don't know what—

He was yanked from his ruminations by the fireplace lighting up. Ron came out, followed by Hermione. Harry stood up and walked over to them. "Hi, guys. What's up? How was your day at the Ministry?"

"We'll talk about that in a minute, Harry. There's something Ron and I want to ask you. Now, we don't want to criticize you, and we know you haven't been yourself lately. But we just want to know..."

Ron jumped in during Hermione's hesitation. "Are you totally mental? I mean, have you completely lost your mind, or your will to live?"

Harry was mystified at Ron's tone and the disbelief on his face. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

Ron looked at Hermione with satisfaction. "I told you he wouldn't know."

"You went out for a fly at a time when there are possibly hundreds of dementors around, looking for people to attack," said a concerned Hermione. "Now, we don't think you're stupid, or crazy—"

“That’s very good of you—“ began Harry sarcastically before being cut off in turn by Hermione.

“But it was very, very poor judgment—“

“Even for you,” Ron put in.

“Will you let me finish?” Hermione snapped at Ron.

“You don’t need to finish, I get the idea,” said Harry impatiently. “Look, I can handle dementors, you know that.”

“That’s not the point!” Hermione said, almost shouting.

“It is for me!” he responded at the same volume. “That fly was the most fun I’ve had in a very long time, it was exactly what I needed to do. You know I feel weird these days. I just need to do what I want to do, and not do what I don’t want to do. I don’t know if this feeling is going to go away or not, but maybe doing this kind of thing will help. I need to make my own decisions, even if they’re stupid.”

Hermione spoke gently. “Harry, how would you feel if I died, or Ron died?”

This took the wind out of Harry’s sails; he flopped onto the sofa and was silent. She’s asking me to look at it from their point of view, he thought. He took a minute to try to do so. “Okay, I get it,” he sighed. “You’re worried. Maybe I would be if I were you. But I don’t know what to tell you. I’m not going to promise that I won’t do that again. But I haven’t lost the will to live, and I don’t think I’m crazy.”

“I was wondering whether your sense of what’s a good risk and what isn’t has been... distorted by the last year, all the risky things we had to do,” suggested Hermione.

Harry shrugged. “If it was, I couldn’t tell you. But I don’t think so. My feeling was like, I really want to have a fly, and I’m not going to let the damn dementors tell me what I can and can’t do. I will say that my sense of self-preservation is enough that if I didn’t have a wand, I wouldn’t have gone.”

“Well, that’s something, anyway,” said Ron; Harry wasn’t sure how sarcastic Ron intended his comment to be. “We don’t want to try to tell you what to do, Harry. Just remember that there are people who care about you.” Harry’s eyebrows went up; it wasn’t like Ron to say something like that. As if realizing it, Ron amended his comment. “Like Hermione, for example.”

Harry grinned as Hermione gave Ron a sour look. “I’ll try to keep that in mind. For Hermione’s sake,” he added, with sarcastic emphasis.

“Oh, you two, you’re so funny,” said Hermione mockingly.

“So, how was your day?” asked Harry. He wanted to change the subject, but he was also interested.

Hermione motioned to Ron. “My day was all about planning and making charts, things like that, that would bore you. Ron’s was more interesting.”

“But sadder,” said Ron, suddenly somber. “I heard a half dozen stories from people about what happened to Muggle-borns under Voldemort, each one sadder than the last. A lot of them had their wands taken, were separated from their spouses, and worse. Some of them were interrogated by Umbridge personally. At least I was able to tell them what happened to her. A few of them were happy, but one woman said, “That doesn’t do me any good.” I asked them what their jobs were; I was thinking if we could get them working, they could get back on their feet again.”

“Are they staying in the Atrium for now?” asked Harry.

Ron shook his head. “There’s a big room, usually used for speeches and big presentations, that Kingsley’s set aside for them. Its apparent space can be expanded however much is necessary, and the Ministry has extra tents. Not enough for everyone, but Kingsley is having people try to buy a bunch more. You know, the kind we used, they’re fairly nice. So at least they won’t be suffering, but they won’t have anything to do all day, either. Kingsley’s doing his best, but there may be only so much the Ministry can do.

"You might be interested to know, by the way, that the most common question I was asked was, what can the Ministry do for me. The second most common was, what's Harry Potter like."

Harry shook his head. "At least it was second. What did you tell them?"

"I said, 'He's not all he's cracked up to be.'" Harry chuckled, wishing that Ron had actually said it. "And it was a close second. With what you did today, it was almost all anyone was talking about." Ron rolled his eyes at Harry's quizzical expression. "Yes, he's already forgotten about those three kids whose lives he saved," he said to Hermione.

"Oh, that. How do you know about that?"

"Did you really think those people were going to keep it to themselves? We're worried about you, but we are glad that you were able to do some good out there."

"It's my saving-people-thing," said Harry, with a glance at Hermione.

"Just don't get in the habit," she warned him.

I'm not making any promises, he thought, but didn't say. He didn't want them to worry, but he had to do what he had to do.

* * * * *

Harry woke up at a few minutes after eight the next morning. Half asleep, he rolled over and thought about falling back asleep, but was jolted awake by a voice. "You've had seven hours, that's enough," said Fred 'sitting' in a chair near the right side of the bed.

With a sigh, Harry turned towards Fred with an expression that exaggerated the annoyance he felt. "I suppose ghosts can't knock."

"I wouldn't even if I could," agreed Fred. "But don't worry, I can be discreet. If I saw that you had morning wood, I would leave and come back later."

Harry tried to hide his embarrassment at the notion. "That's very kind of you," he replied sarcastically.

"Not at all," said Fred. "So, today's the big day. You'll be greatly honored by all of wizarding society—"

"Oh, cut it out. You know how I feel about that."

"Then why go?"

"I've wondered about that myself. I just feel like it would be really rude not to, but it's much more for them than it is for me."

Fred nodded. "And that's the way you should look at it. Be polite, take the award, make them think you're happy. This is for them; they need a hero, and you fit the bill nicely. The best kind of hero is the reluctant one."

"Then I guess I'm perfect."

"George and I couldn't have done it, we'd be too happy with ourselves," agreed Fred. "Lockhart would have loved this, and he had his fans, but most people see through someone like that. No, you're the real deal, like it or not."

"You coming today?"

"Sad to say, the entire Ministry is spiritus non grata." Harry didn't understand the words, but caught the meaning. "But I can watch from Hogwarts."

Harry frowned. "How?"

"They're setting up a magical link, Dad was talking about it last night. They'll be able to see you, and you them. It'll be like you have two audiences. It was because the Hogwarts people really wanted to see the ceremony, but it was impractical for them to come. So, that's better. Or worse, depending on how you look at it."

Harry wasn't sure whether he cared one way or the other. He would be on display; it was just a matter of how much. He talked to Fred a little more, then did his usual morning routine: have breakfast, read the Prophet, take a shower, check the mail. The Prophet's lead story was his rescue of the children, and there were glowing quotes about him from those he rescued. An unsigned editorial praised his actions, but called into question the wisdom of his flying around outside, and urged others not to follow his example. It concluded, "Harry Potter has served our society heroically, and has braved many dangers. It is to be hoped that he has not lost the ordinary human fear of danger, or that he has ceased to recognize it." Wonder if Hermione wrote that editorial, he thought wryly.

He had a light lunch before noon, as he didn't know how long the ceremony would last, and didn't want to be hungry. He had just finished when he heard the fireplace light up, then Ron's voice. "Kreacher, where's Harry?"

"In here, Ron," Harry shouted; Ron walked in a few seconds later. "Hey, what's up?"

"They asked me to set up a Portkey for you; it goes directly to the Minister's office. They probably would have sent someone else, as I am kind of busy, but obviously it had to be someone who knows the house's location."

"That works with fireplaces too? Even though to go through a fireplace you don't usually need to know the physical location of the place?"

Ron shrugged lightly. "I guess so. That's more of a Hermione question, as you know."

Harry nodded. "I suppose. By the way, do you like what you're doing there, for your father?"

"'Like' may be too strong a word, but it's fine for now. I feel like I'm useful, even if I can't do much for them, at least someone is listening. But, like I said, it's kind of sad, too. Heard more stories this morning. One thing for sure, it reminds me that what we did was worth it,

because otherwise they'd still be in those terrible situations. So, no complaints. Well, one. Wouldn't mind getting paid..."

"They don't pay you?"

"Dad says he's sorry, but they can't, me or Hermione. I'm his son, so it would look bad, and even with Hermione, there's bureaucratic stuff that makes it hard. She doesn't mind. I don't either, of course," he added in a falsely casual tone, communicating that the last was the attitude he displayed for his father's and Hermione's benefit.

Harry nodded. "I can see that. Anyway, I didn't know you could do a Portkey."

"I didn't either; they taught me this morning. Apparently Kingsley has temporarily revoked all laws requiring prior approval of Portkeys, because of the dementor situation. Anybody can set up any Portkey they want, provided both sides are either public, or approved by the owner of the private property. Something like that, anyway. This'll be a permanent Portkey, with the identical item at both ends. When you hold onto the Portkey, it goes with you there, but the one at the other end automatically goes to where yours was."

"I didn't know it worked that way," said Harry. "I guess Kingsley is saying that I should feel free to drop by anytime. He doesn't have a fireplace?"

Ron shook his head. "The whole suite of offices near his area doesn't. Security reasons. Anyway, here's your end of the Portkey." He reached into a shoulder bag he was carrying and pulled out a small wooden statue, about ten inches long, of a wizard dressed in usual wizarding robes. He looked at it more closely, then saw the glasses and lightning scar on the forehead.

He looked up in annoyance at a grinning Ron. "Very funny."

"Not bad, actually. Looks a lot like you. Apparently they're selling them in a Diagon Alley shop, Kingsley said he heard about them, and couldn't resist."

"I'll bet," said Harry sourly.

Still grinning, Ron held up his wand. "Portus." To Harry, he added, "I don't have much practice, so if you end up in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, well, I did my best."

"I'll keep that in mind as my lungs fill with water," responded Harry in kind.

"No, just kidding, I was going to test it myself first. If I don't come back, tell Hermione that I died bravely, saving others."

Ron picked up the Portkey and disappeared; the companion materialized in the same place it had been when Ron picked it up. Harry almost picked it up to take a closer look, then realized why he shouldn't, contenting himself to look at it where it stood. It wasn't a bad likeness, he had to admit, though no happier that it existed. Why would anybody buy this, he wondered.

A few seconds later, Ron returned. "Admiring the craftsmanship, I see," he teased Harry, putting the Portkey on the table.

"I'll see if I can get them to do one of you," retorted Harry.

"Yeah, but I wouldn't mind," responded Ron. "Unlike you, I haven't been praised by strangers all my life." He paused for a beat. "Not by anybody, come to think of it."

Harry chuckled. "You're welcome to it."

"Actually, I have gotten a bit, yesterday and today, for helping you. Does feel kind of strange. Well, I have to get back, grab some lunch with Hermione. I was going to ask you to join us, but it's in a public area, and you're probably not ready for that yet." Harry agreed, and Ron left. I wonder when it'll happen that I can walk around in public and not be bothered, he thought. Or, rather, if it'll ever happen.

* * * * *

He touched the Portkey at 12:30 and found himself in Kingsley's office, but nobody was there. He stood there for a minute, thinking about what he should do, then opened the office's only door. He found a youngish, maybe early thirties, woman with light brown hair writing a document. "Excuse me?" he said.

She gave a start. "Oh, Mr. Potter! I'm sorry, the Minister told me about the Portkey, but I'm just not used to the person in that office having one. My name is Darlene, Darlene Benton. It's very nice to meet you." She offered her hand.

"You too," he said, shaking it. "And please call me Harry. The only people who called me 'Mr. Potter' were the teachers at Hogwarts, and it wasn't usually in a good way."

She smiled. "Yes, I remember that. 'Miss Benton, do not run in the halls!' Professor McGonagall said that several times. You're a Gryffindor, right?" He nodded. "I was a Hufflepuff. Most people don't think that's much, but I liked it there. The people were friendly. By the way, I want to thank you for what you did, you know, with You-Know-Who. My last boss was a very unpleasant man, and his associates, even more so. Working here used to be nice, but under them, not really. But now, it's much better. Minister Shacklebolt is a very nice man. Very busy—did you know he's been here until midnight every day since he started?—but very nice. A very hard worker, but there's a lot to fix..."

Harry listened politely, nodding at the right times, wondering if she would ever stop talking. Mercifully, Ron and Hermione chose that moment to walk into the outer office. Darlene cut herself off. "Oh, there you are! The Minister apologized, he wanted to be here, but as he's said, he always has to do ten things at once. He told me to fill you in on what will happen..." She spent the next fifteen minutes explaining what would happen during the ceremony, interspersing various comments and digressions. Harry was impressed; it was as if she never stopped to take a breath. He caught a few exasperated looks from Hermione, which she erased from her face whenever Darlene was looking at her.

Finally, Kingsley entered. "Sorry about that. There's always some very urgent matter." He gestured the three into his office, closing the door. "I gather Darlene told you what you needed to know?"

"And then some," muttered Hermione.

Kingsley smiled. "Yes, she is a little overenthusiastic. But I've discovered that she's a very good worker, and really knows the place; she's saved me hours of effort and heartache on several occasions already. And more importantly, she doesn't take offense when I interrupt her.

"So, there's nothing specific that I need to tell you, but I have a few words to say to Harry. But I won't throw the other two of you out to say them; I'd just ask you to keep what I say to yourselves." Ron and Hermione nodded.

Kingsley faced Harry. "Not that Ron and Hermione are chopped liver, but I'm sure everyone knows that it's you that people will be coming to see, and that this knowledge fills you with something less than pure joy." Harry nodded, his expression indicating that what Kingsley had said was obvious.

"You may have noticed that I've taken no measures to try to get any kind of agreement with the dementors, such as we had before. The fact that such agreements ever existed is unofficial, but any reasonably well-informed person could guess it. I could end this crisis in a day, if I wanted to, by allowing the dementors back into Azkaban to feast on the living, with official sanction."

He paused. Kingsley wasn't normally humorous in any case, but Harry had never seen him so serious. "But I will not do that. Harry, I suspect that if you were in my situation, you would do the same thing. Sirius suffered for twelve years in Azkaban, and he wasn't guilty of anything. I have a similar story; in my case, it was my grandfather. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and was accused of theft and assault. He did try to resist those who arrested him, but it was more of a reflex, and because he knew he hadn't done anything. At that time, people of my particular skin color weren't viewed with great favor, to understate the case. He was sent to Azkaban, supposedly

for five years. But thanks to a bigot who was in the bureaucracy, he was never let out when he was supposed to be. There's more to the story, but you get the general idea. He ended up there for fifteen years, and when he got out, he was never right again. Sirius was able to resist it better because he was a dog, but even so, it was very hard for him. My grandfather ended up... if not crazy, then close enough to it that the difference didn't matter.

"It's hard to find out about this; it isn't in the newspapers, magazines, or history texts. It's essentially wizarding society's dirty little secret. I've asked around a lot, and haven't found out a great deal. What I have found out is that this started about a hundred years ago, and I'm honestly not sure what the situation was before that. It doesn't get brought up, I believe, because those who support it don't want to admit so baldly that they're buying off the dementors with the sanity of the supposedly guilty, and those like me who oppose it don't make an issue of it because they fear—and I do—that wizarding society collectively would support the status quo if they had to make a choice. They would say, it's too bad those people have to suffer, but they are guilty, and it keeps me and my family safe. I hate that fact, but I do think it's true.

"Now, I think I can do a reasonably good job as Minister, and I intend to do that. It's very rare that a non-politician gets this kind of chance, and I want to make the most of it. But then this came along, and I have to deal with it. If this situation isn't resolved, I may not last three months, much less six. But I simply will not allow them back. I'm looking into other methods of detection and protection, and I've sent six trusted Aurors—who are very needed here—to other countries to find out anything they can about how others deal with this. I'm told that within a week or two, we may be able to get enough magical protection around Diagon Alley so that dementors can be kept out but people can walk outside. But I know people will tolerate this for only so long. I can only hope that the dementors give up before the public's patience runs out.

"As to the ceremony... Darlene told you, each of you will have a chance to say a few words. Harry, I hadn't planned to suggest any particular comments to you; this is your day in the sun, and you deserve it, even if you might not really want it. But... I'm hoping that

you can say something about this. Not opposing the old status quo; I'm very pessimistic about people responding to arguments based on principle, especially when it affects their safety. I want people thinking of the dementors as opponents that we have to fight, like Dark wizards."

Affected by what Kingsley had said, as he could tell Ron and Hermione were as well, Harry nodded somberly. "I understand, Kingsley. I didn't have a speech prepared; I was just going to get up there and say whatever came into my head. But I'll definitely say something about this. And it'll have the benefit of being true. You're right, I don't want the dementors there either. Neither did Professor Dumbledore."

"I really respected him for that," agreed Kingsley. "For many years, his was the only public voice opposed to the whole thing. Well, thank you, Harry. Anything you can do, I appreciate." There was a pause; Harry thought Kingsley was going to usher them out of the office, but Kingsley spoke again. "Were you told, by the way, about the benefits of getting this award?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged blank looks. Kingsley gave them a small grin. "Looks like no one thought to mention it. Well, it has been busy around here. There are a few minor things, such as that anything owned by the government that usually charges admission, like museums and such, you won't be charged for, all your life. And you get these ruby decorations, kind of like epaulets, that you're supposed to wear on your dress robes. First class gets ruby, second class gets sapphire. But the biggest one is that you get a stipend from the government: a hundred Galleons a month, for the rest of your life." Harry saw Ron's eyes light up; even Hermione looked surprised. "It's not enough to live on, unless you were very frugal. It's more like the government doesn't want its Merlin First Class honorees somehow losing all their money and living in the street; it would be embarrassing. I think it actually happened once, a very long time ago. So, are you all ready?"

Kingsley leading the way, followed by Ron, Hermione, then Harry, they walked from Kingsley's office to a spot overlooking the Atrium, which appeared to have been magically expanded in size. Kingsley

let out a low whistle. “Even I didn’t expect this many,” he said, impressed. “Looks like a couple thousand. Sorry, Harry. No pressure.”

Ron snickered. Harry was mildly annoyed—he didn’t feel like being teased about that right then—but said nothing. They headed down the stairs, ending up behind the makeshift stage, out of the view of the crowd. Kingsley led them to the right side, where they would stand while waiting to be called. “Okay, here we go. Come out when I call you.” He walked out onto the stage.

“Are you nervous?” Hermione asked Ron excitedly.

“Kind of, I guess,” agreed Ron. “I’m still thinking about the money. How about you, Harry?”

“I’m just thinking about later, when I can relax at Grimmauld Place.” Or maybe hop on my Firebolt, fight a few dementors, Harry thought but didn’t say. He knew they wouldn’t appreciate it, but he felt as though that would be preferable to two thousand people watching him give a speech, something he wasn’t exactly skilled at.

“Thank you very much,” said Kingsley into a microphone, as the polite applause died down. “We are here today to bestow society’s highest honor upon those without whose efforts we would not be free today. This is how our society recognizes and rewards those who have served us well and faithfully. But first, I want to welcome another audience. We will be getting pictures and sound from the Great Hall of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where today’s honorees have many friends and colleagues. Hogwarts, can you hear us?”

He was almost shouted down by the voices and clapping coming from the Great Hall, whose image magically hovered over the crowd in the Atrium; from the stage, it looked as though there were two levels, like in a large auditorium.

“Thank you,” said Kingsley. “Our society recently beat back a deadly threat, one that cost many lives, and greatly damaged many others.

We are still trying to recover, trying to help those who were hurt the most rebuild their lives. Our society is united in this purpose.

“Until recently, the government was controlled by the Dark wizard born by the name Tom Riddle, who went on to call himself Lord Voldemort.” There were some gasps in the crowd. “We could not hope to be free while he lived, and only one wizard, a brave young man marked by prophecy, had a chance to defeat him. He had with him his two closest friends; they comprised an inseparable trio since their first days at Hogwarts. They walked with him into mortal danger as they spent the past year on the run, persistently hunted by their enemies, gathering information that would allow the young man to fulfill his destiny.

“As some of you may know, it is possible to capture memories and display them in the air, as we will do here now, to give you a sense of why we are honoring these three today. I show you a part of one memory now, an event much rumored about, occurring the day before Voldemort’s defeat. To make possible that defeat, they had discovered that they had to acquire and destroy an artifact that sat in one of Gringotts’ most secure vaults, belonging to the Death Eater Bellatrix Lestrange. They managed to get through to the vault and find the item, but were almost captured by the Gringotts goblins, who would certainly have handed them over to Voldemort.”

The image started playing in midair from the point at which Harry managed to use the sword to reach the cup. Watching from the side of the stage, Harry looked quizzically at his friends. “He asked us yesterday for a few memories, of key events,” explained Hermione apologetically. “I thought it seemed only fair.” Her expression showed that she hoped he wouldn’t be upset, and he found that he wasn’t. He had never told the others that they couldn’t relate what they wanted. He knew, of course, that Kingsley hadn’t asked him because he knew Harry would say no.

There were gasps from the audiences as Ron broke the dragon’s chains and they climbed on. As the dragon burst out of Gringotts and into the sky, both crowds erupted in cheers. “It does look impressive when you see it from this point of view,” Ron said to Harry, who grunted.

Kingsley resumed speaking. "Our first honoree was Hogwarts' brightest student, sorted into Gryffindor because she is even braver than she is clever. Here she is, saving the life of the one who saved all of us." Harry watched as the scene at Bathilda Bagshott's home in Godric's Hollow played out in the air, followed by strong applause. "To receive the Order of Merlin, First Class, Miss Hermione Granger."

She took a deep breath and walked out on to the stage. Kingsley put the ruby epaulets on her robe, put the medal on her chest, and shook her hand. "Thank you very much," she said to the audiences. "I want to recognize everyone who helped us, including the Order of the Phoenix, the great people at Hogwarts—" she paused, drowned out by cheers from Hogwarts. "...and everyone else who did what they could to fight the greatest threat of our time."

"Also, I'd like to say that I'm a Muggle-born, and I heard the word 'Mudblood' more than once at Hogwarts. I hope that I will never hear it again. Voldemort used anti-Muggle prejudice as a means to build power, and it means something that evil would use such attitudes to its own advantage. I hope we can build a world in which any kind of prejudice has no place. I would gladly trade this award for that." She paused, and smiling, added, "But I'm also very happy with the award. Thank you very much."

She stepped off to the side, as instructed by Darlene. Kingsley spoke again. "Our next honoree is a young man whose bravery is exceptional, but standard in his family. The image you are about to see includes a pond; this was winter, and the water was as cold as water can be before it becomes ice." The images began, and the audience saw Ron jump in and pull Harry out of the water. The audience applauded as they had for Hermione; Ron walked out, was decorated by Kingsley, and nervously began to speak.

"Thank you for that. After seeing that again, it makes me want to never jump in water for the rest of my life." There was some chuckling from both audiences. "I couldn't believe how cold that was."

"Thank you, Kingsley, both for this, and fighting as you did. The main thing I want to say is that I'm very proud of my family. I have five

brothers and a sister, and every single person in my family actively fought Voldemort. I bet not many people can say that. Their efforts did a lot to make this happen” He paused for a few seconds, then said in a deliberately casual tone, “And Harry, I suppose he had something to do with it.” Ron’s joke got a good laugh; Harry wondered how long he’d taken preparing it. “Anyway, thank you all very much.” He walked over to join Hermione, who took his hand.

“Thank you, Ron. I’ll also say that I spent a lot of time with the Weasley family, and I agree with you wholeheartedly. Now, for our third honoree... Especially when we consider what happened to him as a baby, it could very accurately be said about him that he has been touched by the hand of destiny. And knowing him as I do, he would have preferred that that hand left him alone. Not out of a lack of bravery, obviously; because of modesty, because he values his privacy, because he’s been targeted by Dark forces for much of his life, and because of the toll it has taken, the people he’s lost: his parents, his godfather, other friends. I wouldn’t blame him at all if he wanted to take the next year and do absolutely nothing. He’d have earned it.

“But he’s faced it all with unwavering courage; he’s never met a challenge that he wasn’t willing to take up. A year ago, Albus Dumbledore thought he knew how Voldemort could be beaten, but he knew he wouldn’t live long enough to see it through. He asked Harry to do it, and Harry said he would. Harry didn’t ask Ron or Hermione to do it with him, but they did anyway. They would be with him until the end, whichever way that was. Ladies and gentlemen, the final battle.”

Images and sounds from the last minute of Voldemort’s life filled the arena, and there was barely a sound other than Harry and Voldemort’s words to each other. Then Voldemort was dead, and the audiences at both Hogwarts and the Ministry exploded in loud applause and cheers. “To receive the Order of Merlin, First Class, Mr. Harry Potter.” The din was so loud that Harry wondered whether anyone heard the words, but he stepped forward to receive the award anyway. Kingsley gave him the rubies and the medal, and stepped to one side. Harry stood at the microphone and waited for the noise to die down. Finally, it did.

“Thank you.” He paused, gathering his thoughts. “When I was listening to Kingsley’s introduction, I thought, that really doesn’t sound like me, but whoever he’s talking about must be a hell of a guy.” Many in the audiences laughed, and Harry smiled. “Except for the bit about my privacy, that much is true.

“I want to thank people, like they did, but first I want to say something about our situation right now. We were attacked a few days ago by dementors, some of Voldemort’s allies. I’ve been attacked by them quite a few times, and they’re the most foul, evil creatures you can imagine. Even before they try to take out your soul, they suck out your happiness, anything positive. Anybody who’s ever been near one would tell you that they simply have to be fought. I view this like I viewed Voldemort and the Death Eaters: an evil that we can and will defeat. It may take some time, it may involve some inconvenience and sacrifice. But we can do it. Please give Kingsley and the Ministry your support while they try to deal with the situation, and I urge everyone to do their best to learn the Patronus Charm. Hogwarts, Dumbledore’s Army, let’s see your Patronuses.”

To Harry’s surprise, about thirty Patronuses sprang from students’ wands, though there were only about fifteen D.A. members currently at Hogwarts; Harry wondered whether Neville and others had been quietly teaching it. Obviously impressed, the Atrium audience applauded. Harry noticed an otter and a terrier pass in front of him; he turned and grinned at Ron and Hermione. I guess I did say D.A. members, he thought.

“Thank you. Next, I want to thank everyone at Hogwarts who fought that night; without your help, I couldn’t have done what I did. I’m especially proud of Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, and Ginny Weasley for keeping up the fight at Hogwarts—” Harry paused as there was loud applause at Hogwarts. “...under very difficult circumstances, and the rest of Dumbledore’s Army. You definitely learned more than what I taught you. And the Hogwarts teachers, especially Professors McGonagall, Sprout, Flitwick, and of course Hagrid... you did a lot too. So, thank you. And Professor Dumbledore, who’s gone now, but who knew what he was doing when he set me on this path.”

To Harry's surprise, someone in the first few rows shouted loudly; Harry assumed the whole Atrium could hear. "What about the goblins?"

Harry said the first thing that came into his head. "You want me to thank them?" After the laughter quieted, Harry mused, "I didn't know there were going to be questions. I guess you're referring to the fact that they want my head on a platter." This was met with scattered booing.

Kingsley stepped forward, nudging Harry away from the microphone. "I was going to say this later, but now is a good time... Harry and the others might have had to do a few things that were technically illegal, but were absolutely necessary to defeat Voldemort. In view of that, I've issued for Harry, Ron, and Hermione full and complete pardons for any actions, known or unknown, they might have had to take in order to defeat Voldemort." The audiences cheered heartily.

"Thank you, Kingsley," said Harry. "And as for the goblins, we did what we did because we had to; there just wasn't a choice. I can understand why they're annoyed, but I hope they'll look at it like, we did what we did and Voldemort is dead, or we didn't, and Voldemort is still alive, which situation would they pick. If it's the first, they should see it as something that was unavoidable and necessary. If it's the second, then that tells us where they have their priorities, and... they can live in that society if they want to, where money means more than freedom. I know I don't want to." This was also met with loud applause.

"Back to what I was saying... I guess I was almost finished. I just want to say that I was very glad Ron and Hermione are up here with me today. It feels right, and they deserve it. I want to thank them properly, but... I'm not sure I can." He turned to look at them, and his heart was warmed by their faces. Without thinking about it, he walked over and hugged Hermione hard, followed by Ron. He then waved to the still-applauding crowds, indicating that he was finished speaking.

Kingsley took the microphone again. "Thank you, Harry. And lastly... there's one more image that I'd like to show, from yesterday. I would have thought that Harry had done enough, but apparently not. You

may have heard or read about this.” Images in the air showed his fast descent and rescue of the children playing; a surprised Harry wondered from whom they had acquired the memory. “I don’t recommend that anyone fly around, like Harry was, but the fact that he saved more lives surprised me not at all. This just seems to be what he does, and it emphasizes the reason we honor him today. Let us try to have a society in which his example is followed: in which we help those in trouble or danger, not thinking of ourselves first.

“That concludes our ceremony for today. There are still many things to be done, a lot of work ahead of us, to restore our society to what it was before the darkness came upon us. I am sure that we can and will do just that. Thank you for your attendance and attention, and thank you to Hogwarts.” Both audiences applauded, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione walked through a door at the back of the stage, and were behind it. Kingsley joined them a few seconds later, and gave Harry a wry look. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Did you really have to do that last one?” asked Harry, exasperated. “All it does is build me up to be some kind of hero, and you know how I feel about that. You know I wouldn’t have wanted you to do that.”

Kingsley spoke calmly. “You did the thing, Harry. Yes, I didn’t have to show it, but it was pertinent to what we were there for: to recognize and honor your contributions to society. And I wanted it emphasized that, however imprudent what you did was, you were out there fighting dementors.”

“I didn’t go out there to fight dementors! I wanted to have a fly!”

“Yes, but you did fight them. A lot of people would have run away, and of course, they wouldn’t have been out in the first place. I’m sorry, Harry, but if you insist on doing heroic things publicly, I’m going to publicize them. And yes, I do want you as a symbol. There are a lot of things you could do to help right now. I’m not asking you to do them because I know how you feel these days, and as I said up there, I don’t blame you. You’ve been through a lot, and you deserve a rest. But you can be a symbol without actually doing anything, and right now, our society needs a symbol, someone who they can rally around, be proud of. After what you did, like it or not, you are a hero. I’m not

going to apologize for pointing that out to people.” Kingsley’s stern expression reminded Harry of a parent talking to a child who was acting ungratefully. Then Kingsley’s face softened, and he added, “But I also wanted to thank you for what you said about the dementors. You said it every bit as well as I could have, and I’m sure it’ll help.”

Appreciating Kingsley’s compliment, but still annoyed over the last set of images, Harry nodded and said nothing. Ron opened his mouth to speak as a paper airplane flew into Hermione’s left hand. Surprised, she unfolded it and read it. “Some reporter for Witch Weekly... he’s asking me to meet him in the lobby of the second floor, says he has information about my parents! What information could he have? Did something happen? I’d better go...” An apprehensive Hermione hurried off. As she did, two reporters made their way behind the stage and asked Harry for an interview; he turned both down, saying he had to go. He said goodbye to Ron and Kingsley, and Disapparated.

Not sure exactly when he had made the decision to go there, Harry found himself in front of the door of the Hog’s Head. He knocked, but there was no answer. Could it be closed? Not wanting to linger outside, he tried the door, which was unlocked. He went inside in time to see an old man appearing from a doorway which no doubt separated the living quarters from the establishment. “Hello, Mr. Dumbledore.”

Aberforth grunted. “Call me Ab, everyone I don’t dislike does.”

Harry smiled a little. “Thanks for the compliment.” He sat down at the bar. “Are you closed, or do you just have no customers?”

“Comes out to the same thing. Right now, no fireplace, no customers. Anyway, I thought you were off getting honored.”

“Just finished.”

“And you came here to get drunk, to escape the trauma and humiliation of the experience.”

Harry couldn't help but chuckle. "Something like that. I wasn't planning on getting drunk. I was escaping the press, though."

Aberforth nodded. "Vultures. You don't know how many people have been in here asking about Albus since that stupid woman wrote that book."

"But it turned out—I admit, I was surprised—it turned out that most all of what she said was true."

Aberforth, dusting below the bar as Harry spoke, shot him a glare. "That's not the point, boy! You should know that better than anyone. It's no one's business but those who were involved. All people like her do is open old wounds, cause pain for others' entertainment. Or do you want a biography written about you?"

Shame flushed Harry's cheeks as he saw Aberforth's point. "No, I don't," he admitted. "I... I guess I wasn't thinking when I said that."

Aberforth nodded understandingly. "A common affliction of the young. And even the not-so-young, sometimes. We learn."

Harry had no response, but appreciated Aberforth's comment. After a pause, he asked, "How about a butterbeer?"

Aberforth Summoned one from a container at the other end of the bar, removed the cap, and put it in front of Harry. "Two Sickles. You may be a hero, but you're still paying."

Harry grinned. "I appreciate that. But I don't seem to be carrying any money right now. Can I owe you?"

Aberforth rolled his eyes. "If only I had a Knut for every time I've heard someone say that... Longbottom's already run up a tab of more than ten Galleons, swears he'll pay me back after the term ends." With exaggerated annoyance, he waved his hand, indicating his reluctant agreement. Smiling again, Harry started in on his butterbeer. A minute was spent in silence. Harry looked up at the portrait of Arianna, who smiled at him; he smiled back. It was odd to think that Hogwarts was just on the other side of the portrait.

“Well,” said Aberforth. “Aren’t you going to tell me?”

Harry frowned. “Tell you what.”

“That I was wrong, that my brother was right. He asked you to do the thing, you did it. I was sure it would end up with your death.”

“Well, it did,” said Harry causally, before realizing how that sounded. “Well, it kind of did. I went into the forest to give myself up, and Voldemort did the Killing Curse. I was sort of dead.”

Aberforth eyed Harry as though he were not quite right. “Got better, did you?”

Harry laughed. “I’m not quite sure how it worked, to be honest. He did the Killing Curse, and all of a sudden I was in this strange place...” Harry spent the next twenty minutes telling Aberforth the story, backtracking to cover the search for the Horcruxes, pausing only to drink butterbeer.

Aberforth was impassive as he listened, and said nothing until after Harry finished. “So, you weren’t wrong about him, in a way,” concluded Harry. “He sent me out to my death. I’m pretty sure he didn’t know I would survive.”

“And you don’t hold that against him,” asked Aberforth calmly, with an inscrutable gaze.

Harry shrugged. “It had to be done. Would you want to walk around for your whole life with a piece of Voldemort inside you? It was no fun, believe me.”

“Is death better?”

Harry’s eyebrows went up; he hadn’t thought of it that way. “More peaceful, anyway.”

“Wish you’d stayed?” asked Aberforth with a shrewd expression.

Surprised, Harry shook his head. "I did choose to come back."

"Why?"

Harry thought about it. "I'm not sure. Maybe to finish off Voldemort. I just did. One thing I didn't think of until now, though, is that I'm not really afraid of death anymore. Whatever happened, that place... if I'd gone the other way, I have no idea what's there, but I'm sure it's something, and I'm sure it's not a bad thing."

There was a silence. "Walking out to your death... I'd think that would do something to a person."

Harry glanced down at himself. "Well, I seem fine."

Aberforth was rearranging bottles on a shelf as he spoke. "There are things apart from what meets the eye. Are you sure you didn't imagine it?"

Harry had wondered the same thing. "It didn't feel like something I imagined, and it was pretty specific information I got. But it didn't happen in the... physical world, so I can see why people would think that. But I was thinking that just because something doesn't happen in the physical world doesn't mean it must be imagination. It felt real, it affected me. So, I'm going with the idea that it really happened. If someone says it must have been imagination, I'll just say, maybe it was. I don't need to persuade anyone. It was for me only."

Aberforth's eyebrows rose slightly. "That's a bit of perspective I wouldn't have expected. I suppose it did affect you. Of course, nobody'll ask you, because you're not telling people." Harry nodded. "So, this is the big story, the one everyone wants to hear, that you don't want to tell. So, why tell me?"

With a small grin, Harry replied, "Maybe because you didn't ask. I'm not sure. But I felt like you deserved to know; this was a part of your brother that you didn't know. That he was sorry, that he felt guilty, that he thought you were a better man than him."

"If that was him, then yes, I definitely didn't know that," agreed Aberforth solemnly. He walked to the other end of the bar, picked up a case of ale, and with obvious effort, walked to where he'd been standing, and put it down on his side of the bar. He exhaled, and started putting them behind the bar, a bottle at a time.

"Why didn't you just levitate the case?" wondered Harry.

Aberforth didn't look up. "You have to use the muscles occasionally, or they atrophy. You're young, but it wouldn't kill you to do some physical exercise once in a while. You know," he added, still focusing on the bottles, "you want to be careful what you tell to a bartender. Stories are currency to a bartender, his stock in trade. He hears them, he tells them. You've just told me the granddaddy of them all." Now he looked up at Harry with those penetrating blue eyes. "Why do you think I won't tell people?"

Harry hadn't thought about it. "If you do, then you weren't the person I thought you were."

Aberforth grunted in amusement. "Is that supposed to make me feel guilty?"

Harry shook his head. "I just mean, I would have made a misjudgment. But I don't think I did." He gazed at Aberforth serenely.

"Did you misjudge my brother?"

Harry thought for a minute. "No. I trusted him, and I don't regret it. There were things I didn't know, but he was right not to tell me; it would have made things harder. I'm sure if he could have saved me, he would have. He cared about me, but he knew he had to do what was best for everyone. In the end, I think he was the person I thought he was."

Aberforth was silent, uncertainty behind his eyes. "I, on the other hand, was wrong. I told you to run off, save yourself. Think of how things would be different if you'd done as I told you. Looks like you were right to trust him."

"You didn't know," said Harry simply.

Aberforth nodded, and sighed. "There are always things we don't know. An old friend once told me not to judge other people quickly, because there are always things you don't know that would affect your judgment if you knew. Things aren't as they seem. Clearly, she was right. In my mind, he was still the person he was when we were young. I suppose people do change."

For some reason, this made Harry think of Malfoy; Dumbledore had clearly hoped that Malfoy would change. "I guess so," he agreed. "Well, I should be going," he said, standing. "Do you mind if I come by again?"

"You damn well better, you owe me two Sickles," said Aberforth, deadpan. Harry smiled. "I usually open at eleven, so... before then is fine."

Harry nodded, appreciating that Aberforth understood that Harry would rather not have company. "Thanks," he said, and Disapparated.

* * * * *

Back at Grimmauld Place, Harry lay on the bed relaxing for a while, then spent some time reading a book on household spells, which as he would be living alone for the foreseeable future, he felt he should know. Kreacher continued to go about his daily duties well and in good spirits, much better than at any time Harry had known him, but Harry still had conflicting feelings about owning a house-elf, or owning a sentient being of any sort. He felt somewhat guilty for doing so, but he knew very well that Kreacher would be crushed by any move to set him free. He could only imagine what Hermione would be doing if Kreacher had fallen into her hands.

He went downstairs and looked at the mail, which was starting to pile up again, no doubt as a result of the ceremony. He started opening them; as he expected, most were from random citizens praising him, and all said they had attended the ceremony. A few contained praise so effusive that Harry felt himself turning red as he read the letters.

An even more effusive letter arrived from Lucia, the mother of two of the children he'd saved.

The next letter was from a reporter; he was about to throw it away when he noticed Hermione's name in the letter, which was very unusual. He read:

Dear Mr. Potter,

My name is Dormus Pinter, and I write for a magazine called Witch Weekly. I am writing to you to offer you an opportunity to react to an article I am writing, which will be printed the day after tomorrow. It concerns your friend Hermione Granger.

Following your highly admirable defeat of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, it became well-known that you, Miss Granger, and your friend Mr. Weasley spent many months in close company, on the run and in hiding. Since you were raised in Muggle households, it would have been necessary for you and Miss Granger to take measures to ensure the safety of those who raised you, who would naturally have become targets of the Death Eaters. The purpose of my article is to investigate and report on the disposition of those who might have been in danger. In your case, it did not take long to discover that you had managed to persuade your uncle, aunt, and cousin to go into hiding. Having heard about your relatives, I do not imagine this was easy.

Following the paper trail left in the Muggle world by Miss Granger's parents, however, led to a much different discovery. In Australia, they insisted that they did not have a daughter, though Miss Granger's mother admitted that she often felt as though she had, and had suffered from some disorientation and seen a psychologist. She was taken to a magical specialist, who was able to mostly remove the memory modifications Miss Granger had made on both her parents. They came to England, and will attend the award presentation, after which they will meet their daughter.

I am in the process of writing an article about these events, and as you are a close friend of Miss Granger's, I would welcome your perspective. I invite you to visit my office (which you can do by

fireplace, by saying, 'Witch Weekly Pinter') before six p.m. today if you would like to comment. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Dormus Pinter

Harry had started to cringe halfway through the letter; now he suddenly knew why she had received that paper airplane. No doubt she had been shocked to come face to face with her parents; he could only imagine how traumatic it must have been for her. He found himself becoming angry at the position the reporter's actions had put her in. He put the letter on the table, walked to the fireplace, threw in Floo powder, and spoke the name of the reporter's fireplace.

He was suddenly in a smallish office, with many bookcases, and papers scattered all over counters and a desk. From the general disorganization, he could have easily guessed that a man, not a woman, worked in the office. The man sitting at the desk was in his early twenties, with short dark hair and a face that seemed open and friendly. He looked up, and his face lit up with surprise.

"Mr. Potter! You got my owl, thank you for coming..." He had stood up and was approaching Harry; he appeared to be about to extend his hand when he looked at Harry's face and discerned his attitude. "I... gather you're not happy about the article—"

"That's a huge understatement," said Harry, his tone reflecting his anger. "How could you do this to her?"

His face less friendly now, Pinter spoke earnestly, with the conviction of one sure of being in the right. "I didn't set out to do anything to her. It was going to be a little human-interest story: how did the heroes take care of those close to them who were in danger. No big deal, and that's what it would have been with you; you did what you should have done. But Harry, her actions were irresponsible, bordering on criminal. You just simply cannot change such huge parts of a person's memory and not cause damage, and I was stunned that she would attempt such a thing—"

“She was desperate!” Harry responded, almost shouting. “She was afraid her parents wouldn’t believe her, that they wouldn’t leave!”

Pinter looked at him quizzically. “What do you mean, ‘wouldn’t?’ They didn’t believe her, they refused to leave, and so she...” Seeing Harry’s reactions, Pinter’s mouth slowly fell open. “She didn’t tell you! Exactly what did she tell you about what she had done?”

Astonished, he reminded himself that he was talking to a reporter, and had to be very careful. “I’m not saying anything for you to print in the paper—“

Pinter held up a hand as if taking an oath. “We’re off the record. Nothing you say will be used unless you specifically say so.”

Harry took a deep breath, trying to calm down. “She told me that she modified her parents’ memories and had them go to Australia so they would be safe there. She didn’t say anything about having already tried to persuade them. Are you saying that’s what happened?”

Pinter nodded. “She did try to persuade them, she failed, then she did what she did without their consent. And she didn’t tell you because...”

Harry could tell that Pinter had already realized the answer, but continued the sentence anyway. “She knew I would feel bad about what she had done, or what she told me she had done, and didn’t want me knowing the rest...”

Pinter finished the sentence. “Because you would feel responsible, that it was because of you, helping you, that she did it.”

Harry closed his eyes for a second in sorrow, understanding that the burden on Hermione had been even greater than he had thought. “You can’t print this article,” he said earnestly. “You just can’t.”

Pinter looked unhappy, but determined. “The damage is already done. Not that I set out to do damage, of course, but... the situation between her and her parents is pretty bad now, but printing the article won’t change that.”

“It’ll humiliate her—“

“I don’t think so,” countered Pinter. “Look, she screwed up. She tried to do a lot more than she was capable of; only a trained Obliviator and Muggle expert could have done it well and covered the tracks, and even then, psychological damage would still have been possible, maybe likely. If she knew the subject better, she would have known this—“

“If it was the best she could do, maybe she’d say it was better than them being dead,” responded Harry hotly.

“She did say exactly that, in fact,” agreed Pinter. “I sympathize with her, I do. I understand that she was desperate, and didn’t have the time or the resources to do it better. But I think people will understand that, and also sympathize with her. It’s a tragic story, but people should understand the sacrifice she made to stay with you, and without her—I assume from what we saw at the ceremony, she saved your life—“

“More than once,” Harry confirmed.

“And she knew you needed her, so this was in a way a sacrifice she made for wizarding society, and if people know that—“

“It isn’t their business!” shouted Harry in frustration. “It’s private!” Even in his anger, he couldn’t help but remember the conversation he’d had with Aberforth, about Rita Skeeter’s book, not that long ago.

“Earlier today, she received society’s highest honor,” said Pinter quietly. “She’s a public person now.”

“And this is how we thank her, by opening up her most personal problems for people to gossip about,” said Harry bitterly. “Do you know, Mr. Pinter, why I haven’t talked to the media, why I won’t talk about what happened, what I went through in the past year? Because it’s my life, and I don’t want it splashed on the front pages, for people to read and think they know who I am, when they don’t. It’s for exactly this kind of reason. People say, why doesn’t Potter talk to the press? They should be written about, then they might not wonder.”

Pinter stared at Harry. "I'm sorry, Harry. I do feel bad for her, but... this is my job. This is the way things are."

"You must be able to do your job, and be a good person, at the same time."

Pinter had a rueful expression, nearly a smile. "By all accounts, Rita Skeeter isn't a good person. But she's the top reporter in the country."

"I don't think it has to be that way," said Harry. "I hope it doesn't." After a pause, Harry remembered something Pinter had said. "Why did you say this was a 'tragedy?' That usually means someone died, and here, no one did."

Pinter spoke slowly. "The Ministry has records, of course, of the addresses of the families of Muggle-born wizards. You lived at 4 Privet Drive; your aunt and uncle did not sell their home, no doubt hoping to return. Hermione's parents, not intending to return, did sell theirs, to a young couple. A month after the Ministry fell, they were found dead, in their home." Pinter looked down, his sorrow obvious.

Harry winced, and fought back the tears that suddenly threatened. "Does she know?"

Pinter shook his head. "With the other thing, I didn't have a chance to tell her. She'll find out when she reads the article."

Oh, God, thought Harry. As if the rest wasn't bad enough... "This," he said quietly, "is how our society recognizes and rewards those who have served us well and faithfully. Apparently." He turned to the fireplace, and left before Pinter could respond.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 4, The Baby and the Knut: As pressure from the goblins to be compensated for their losses escalates, fallout from the trio's actions in the past year causes distress for Hermione and one of the Weasleys; Harry's strong aversion to being told what to do brings him close to conflict with Molly.

From Chapter 4:

“Well, I thought I should go talk to the Dursleys. Now that this is over, they can go back to their usual lives, but they may not know. Do you think Dedalus would have told them by now?”

She glanced down, troubled. “I’m sorry, Harry... I thought you knew. He died a few months ago. Well, not really died, but... they caught him, and...” She sighed heavily. “Dementors.”

Chapter 4

The Baby and the Knut

Back in his bedroom—Sirius's bedroom; he could never quite think of it as his—he lay on the bed, mulling things over. The conversation with Pinter had strengthened, and to him, justified his reluctance to publicly tell the story of what had happened. Look what happens, he thought, when the media gets a hold of something. God only knows what they'd find in what we did that would make us look bad. It intensified his mood, which tended to be slightly negative by default.

That thought caused him to brood on that topic for a while. Earlier, he thought, I was given society's highest honor, stood in a public place, and was applauded loudly by a few thousand people. You'd think I'd be happy, but for me it was just a job, something I had to do. What would make me happy? Why do I look at Ginny as some kind of obligation instead of something that makes me happy? When was I last happy? Talking to Aberforth, I was, at least, not unhappy. Why? Because he treats me like anyone else? No... she doesn't treat me like a hero, but she does want something from me, I think. I broke up with her a year ago, and she accepted that, but probably now she thinks that since the reason I did it isn't valid anymore, I should get back with her. But I can't... she expects something of me, maybe that's it. Aberforth expects nothing of me, except that I pay my bar tab. But Ginny, Bill and Fleur with the baby, Kingsley, people on the street, they all expect something of me, and I run away from that. Why? I guess I've never liked that—remember Hog's Head in fifth year—but this feels different. But I have no bloody idea why...

A half hour later, tired of his ruminations and having made no progress, he resignedly went downstairs to check the mail again. Before he got there, however, another idea occurred to him. He asked Kreacher for a medium-sized black cloth, which the surprised house-elf quickly provided him. He went back upstairs, looked at the statue of himself that Ron had brought, and draped the cloth over it. What was Kingsley thinking when he gave me this, thought Harry disgustedly. He had to know I'd hate this. Still not happy that it was so out in the open, he opened some drawers that appeared not to have been used for a long time. He found old clothes, some Hogwarts

paperwork relating to Sirius, and to his surprise, large framed portraits of Sirius's mother, father, and brother. He supposed Sirius had been given these when he was young with the idea that he would put them up, but of course had shoved them in a drawer.

Harry thought for a minute, then took out the portrait of Regulus. He looked about the same age as Harry was now, with dark hair and a slightly grim expression most of the time. His face moved and changed expression, but didn't appear to be one of those portraits that had its own personality. Harry placed the portrait upright on the back left corner of the desk, shoving the statue (being careful not to touch it directly) behind it, out of sight. He thought it fitting; to him, Regulus was a symbol of someone who was raised on a Dark path, but came to his senses, and did what he could to fight what he now realized was wrong. He thought about Malfoy again. Could this be Malfoy's path? Or am I letting myself be too influenced by what Dumbledore wanted?

He went downstairs again, and picked up the mail; after what had happened with Hermione, he almost didn't want to, but knew he should. Again, most of it was fan mail, which he skimmed and quickly set aside. To his surprise, there was a short letter from Neville, thanking Harry for mentioning him so prominently in his speech. That owl got here fast, thought Harry.

There was also a letter from Andromeda Tonks. She congratulated Harry on his recent accomplishments, reminded him of his role as Teddy's godfather, and suggested that he visit her so he could learn about how to care for a baby. He didn't like the tone of the letter, which seemed to him to be mildly chastising him for not already having done so. Not if she's going to be that way about it, he thought. I'll do it when I feel like it, but not before. He set the letter aside.

After a few more fan letters, there was another one from a reporter, this time from the Prophet. Oh, God, what now, Harry wondered. With trepidation, he read, and found an article attached to a letter for him, explaining that the reporter was working on an article for the next day's Prophet. The latest draft of the article was attached, and the reporter wanted Harry's comment and confirmation of the information in the article. He turned his attention to the second page.

Goblins Escalate Rhetoric, Point Claw at Potter

High-ranking Gringotts goblins today put further pressure on the Ministry to negotiate regarding their demands for compensation for losses suffered under the government controlled by the now-deceased evil Dark wizard Voldemort, threatening unspecified 'consequences' if their demands were not met.

The goblin sources, who as per their usual practice declined to be identified, expressed particular fury at yesterday's ceremony (see article, page 1) honoring Harry Potter and his close friends for their role in Voldemort's defeat. "It is bad enough that they are honoring such a criminal," said one high-level goblin, referring to the fact that Potter and his friends broke into a Gringotts vault to steal an artifact said to be crucial to Voldemort's defeat. "Then they possess the audacity to display a memory of the crime, clearly showing the guilt of the accused, only to have this be applauded lustily by the masses, and instantly and casually forgiven by the Minister of Magic. This is a direct and deliberate slap in the face to goblins, serving to remind us of our status as second-class citizens. This has been emphasized by the Minister's insulting delay in opening serious negotiations. Taken together, these provocations cannot be long ignored by the goblin community."

Minister Shacklebolt declined comment for this article, but Undersecretary Paul Clemons, head of the Non-Human Liaison Office, denied that any insult to goblins was intended. "We respect our friends in the goblin community," he said. "But they must understand that we too have been through a difficult time recently, and that the government is focusing its resources on helping those who were most harmed in recent months. As for Mr. Potter's actions, they were a regrettable necessity. As he pointed out, the consequences of not doing what he did were much worse, especially in the long term, even for our goblin friends. I think most would agree that his point was a quite reasonable one."

The goblin source disagreed. "Potter's statement regarding us—made, I should point out, after a joke at our expense—was arrogant, self-serving justification. The law is the law, and we are all

responsible for our actions.” Under repeated questioning, the goblin refused to address specifically Mr. Potter’s point, repeatedly referring to the letter of the law.

In a surprise move, likely prompted by their anger with Mr. Potter, the goblins disclosed today that two days after Voldemort’s defeat, Mr. Potter’s house-elf went to Gringotts and withdrew the entire contents of his vault, estimated by the goblin source to be between seventy-five and one hundred thousand Galleons. “This action points directly and clearly to a consciousness of guilt,” said the goblin. “It is nearly unprecedented for a wizard to empty out his vault, and it is nearly unprecedented for a wizard to send his house-elf to Gringotts in his stead.”

[In the interest of accuracy, this reporter feels compelled to add that it is nearly unprecedented for the Gringotts goblins, with their reputation for secrecy, to disclose information about any transaction publicly, much less publicly estimate the value of the contents of any vault.]

“In addition, the timing of this withdrawal is highly suspicious,” the goblin went on. “What are we to assume but that he wished to deny us the ability to reimburse our losses from his vault, as we would be entitled to do if he were found to be at fault? And why do so unless one knows that one is guilty, and responsible? Further, he clearly sent his house-elf in an effort to avoid having to answer to us for his crimes.”

(space for Potter’s comments)

As for the goblins’ threats, those knowledgeable with goblin tactics suspect that they may threaten to limit the withdrawals of all customers as a pressure tactic. The last time the goblins had a serious dispute with the Ministry, in 1968, they initiated a drastic slowdown of services at Gringotts, causing customers to have to wait for hours to get into their vaults, resulting in long lines. The goblins at that time claimed that the long lines caused the slowdown, not the other way around. When asked about this possibility, the goblin source said, “We cannot control the number of people who attempt to access their vault. Long lines cause delays, no matter what business one is in.” If the conflict continues to escalate, long lines could soon

form in front of Gringotts, and those waiting may not care which was the cause, and which the effect.

Finished reading the draft article, Harry exhaled in frustration, got up from the chair in which he read the mail, walked to the sofa, and plopped onto it, lying on his back. What is wrong with them, he thought. Are they that selfish? Are they that embarrassed that someone got into a vault, and are they trying to make such a huge deal of it that no one ever tries again? The way I feel these days, this is the last damn thing I need.

He knew that he would have to comment, and he silently thanked the writer for sending him the draft article. Without it, he knew he probably wouldn't have commented, maintaining his usual silence. But reading the article, he got a sense of how it would look if he didn't say anything, and it wasn't good.

Kreacher walked through the room, carrying laundry. "Master Harry? Is there something Kreacher can fetch?"

"A goblin's—no, never mind," he muttered. He had been about to say 'a goblin's head on a pike,' but stopped for fear that Kreacher would take him literally.

"Filthy goblins is troubling Master Harry?"

"Well, I don't know how filthy they are, but yes. You may not know, but Ron, Hermione, and I had to break into a Gringotts vault to... to accomplish Regulus's mission. There was an artifact in a vault—"

"Kreacher knows all about that, Master Harry," Kreacher said eagerly. "House-elves was talking about it at Hogwarts after the battle. They is amazed at Master Harry's bravery, and envies Kreacher for belonging to him."

Great, thought Harry sardonically. He went on to explain in simple terms what was in the article, Kreacher becoming more outraged by the minute. By the time Harry finished, he felt sure that Kreacher would go out and kill goblins without being instructed to do so.

Talking to Kreacher, however, had given Harry an idea. “Kreacher, I’d like you to go with me somewhere.”

A short time later, he was in the office of Prophet reporter David Gleason, the article’s writer, a distinguished-looking, portly man in his late fifties. “You want me to interview your house-elf,” he said, with mild incredulity.

“Well, I would say something too, but he’s the one who was there. It makes more sense that you’d ask him.”

Still baffled, Gleason said, “You know, we usually don’t quote house-elves. They’re not considered to be people.”

Raising his eyebrows, Harry responded, “Well, obviously they’re not human, but I don’t see why they shouldn’t be treated the way we treat people.”

Now, Gleason had a small grin. “You grew up in a Muggle home, sometimes I forget. Your attitude has a certain... innocence that I find appealing. Well, all right, but I’ll have to fight with my editors to get this in. There is one problem, though: his testimony won’t be considered persuasive. A house-elf will say anything you tell him to say.”

Not having thought of that, Harry frowned, then had an idea. He crouched and faced Kreacher. “Kreacher, what I’m about to say is an order. Everything you say to this man must be the truth. You can decide not to answer a question if you want to, but if you answer, it must be truthful, even if that contradicts any order I’ve previously given. Do you understand?”

Kreacher nodded earnestly. “Of course, Master Harry. Kreacher understands.”

Harry nodded. “Sorry. I know you would anyway, this is just for him.” He stood again, and turned to Gleason. “Is that enough?”

Gleason chuckled. “Harry Potter, apologizing to a house-elf. That’s a news story right there. But yes, that should be all right.” He

proceeded to ask Kreacher to tell the story of what happened, and Kreacher recounted it as he had for Harry. At one point, Gleason interrupted. "How exactly did they threaten Harry?"

"One of goblins said, 'we should get Potter here, give him...'" Kreacher is sorry, Kreacher did not catch the word; it was unfamiliar word. Kreacher knows goblin language, this word was not usual word."

"You speak Gobbledygook?" asked Gleason in surprise.

Kreacher shook his head. "Kreacher understands goblins language, not speaks. Other goblins was surprised, as if said something shocking. Another said, 'we can't do that,' others were not sure. But Kreacher is sure that this unknown word is something bad. Sound of voices. Kreacher is sure Gringotts not safe for Harry Potter. Kreacher took all of vault, returned. Harry Potter and Ron Weasley was surprised, but when Kreacher told the story, Master and friend understood. Said Kreacher did well." Kreacher puffed with pride.

Harry shrugged. "He told it as well as I could have. That's what happened. So, I was pretty surprised to read that this means I know I committed a crime, and so forth. I didn't go myself partly because I just didn't want to leave the house; I'm not so big on going out in public these days. I'm kind of recognizable. I did know that the goblins wouldn't exactly be thrilled to see me, but I had no idea that they would be like this. What is it with them, anyway? I mean, you cover goblins for the Prophet, right? It's like, 'yeah, you put out the fire and saved my family, but look, you got my suit all wet! You better pay for it!' What are they thinking?"

Gleason's face showed his sympathy for what Harry was saying, and his understanding that Harry was young and didn't know a lot. "First of all, Harry—may I call you Harry?" Harry gestured his assent. "I cover economic issues for the Prophet, not goblins per se. But naturally, I am quite familiar with them, so I'm not surprised. When I saw the images of your escapade today, my thought was, oh, my, there will be trouble. I knew they would be incensed, and I wonder to what extent Minister Shacklebolt understood what he would be stirring up. It was a rousing image for the human population, of

course; I could not help but cheer as I watched. But in the end, it may have done more harm than good.

“Now, your question was regarding the goblins’ character. A true and complete answer could require several hours, and I am unfortunately on deadline. What do you recall of goblins from your History of Magic classes?”

Somewhat abashed, Harry said, “Mostly that there was lots of conflict between humans and goblins, but more than that... to be honest, I had a hard time paying attention.”

“It is still Professor Binns, is it?” Harry nodded. “Understandable; he was not that interesting when he was alive, when he taught me. Well, I’ll give you the short version. Distrust between goblins and humans goes back almost a thousand years, and at some points it’s been worse than others. Historically, they have ample reason to mistrust humans, but looking in terms of recent history, relations haven’t been all that bad.

“Even so, goblins are known to have adopted a policy, or we could say a philosophy, of ‘goblins first.’ For them, any situation is looked at exclusively in terms of how it affects goblins. Now, every group or government does that, to various degrees; it’s commonly known as looking out for one’s own self-interest. To some extent, it’s understood and accepted. But for goblins, it’s taken to extremes. This is not true of every single goblin, but... if a goblin sees a human baby about to be killed at the same time as he can pick up a Knut in the road, and there’s only time to do something about one, he’ll pick up the Knut.” Harry’s face reflected his revulsion. “He might save the baby if he thought he could profit from it, perhaps get a reward, but he would view it strictly in those terms. Most people react to this in the way you just did, which is why goblins mostly keep to themselves. That’s also why Gringotts is so popular; people trust goblins to keep their money safe—which is in the goblins’ interest—with that same ferocity.

“It’s not known exactly when this attitude became standard, but it’s thought that it’s partly the result of dealings with humans, dealings in which humans betrayed agreements any number of times, and acted

in their own self-interest without shame or regard for how their actions hurt goblins. The goblins, who were far from blameless in this, I should add, finally decided that no quarter could be given humans, and they have acted in ways consistent with this. I could go on for quite a while, but this should be sufficient for you to understand their attitude towards what you did. You-Know-Who is gone, so they only think about their interests now. They act strictly within the confines of the law, and they're very literal about it."

"The law is the law," Harry recalled. Kreacher muttered something about goblins that Harry couldn't quite hear.

"Exactly. As for their anger, they've borne insults from humans for centuries, and they have a low tolerance for it. So, your actions seem to them to be a deliberate provocation, once you remove from consideration the reason you did it."

Harry was silent for a moment. This explained a lot, but the goblins' attitude was still reprehensible... he felt he was beginning to see the value of studying history; he just wished that Hogwarts had had a professor who could make it interesting, or at least, not coma-inducing. He was satisfied that he was blameless, that there was nothing that he should feel he needed to do to make the situation right; he would go home, lead his usual life, and let Kingsley deal with it. Out of curiosity, he asked, "If you were me, what would you do?"

Gleason raised his eyebrows. "That's an interesting question." He paused, thinking. "Most interesting. You know, I can't say that I'm sure. Strictly from the point of view of dealing with the goblins, the thing to do would be to apologize, and emphasize your great respect for them, their culture, and so forth. The problem with apologizing is that from any reasonable human point of view, what you did was not only not wrong, but truly heroic. Apologizing would make you look pathetic, giving in easily to goblin threats, and the fact that you felt forced to do so would offend humans greatly, turning them against goblins. And I'm not even certain that it would work. It could be argued that the 'insult' they suffered is a pretext to support their main demand, to be reimbursed, which you can do nothing about." It occurred to Harry that it wouldn't be impossible to pay the goblins

with the Black family fortune, but he quickly dismissed the idea. No way in hell will I do that, he thought.

“So,” continued Gleason, “all in all, I don’t think there’s much you personally can do. You would do well to say nothing inflammatory about goblins, but fundamentally, this is a dispute between the goblins and the Ministry, because in endorsing your actions, the Ministry has in a sense taken responsibility for them. Some might advise you to go into extensive detail about the circumstances, to more completely explain your actions. While I would personally be very interested in such information, however, it would not truly help.”

“The goblins wouldn’t care,” finished Harry, “because it’s only about what I did, not the reasons I did it. Even if I’d done it to save the world from immediate destruction, they’d be acting the same way.”

“Precisely. The details would only sway the human community, but your standing is so high there that it wouldn’t be necessary.” After a pause, Gleason asked, “Harry... if you don’t mind my asking, it’s been a week, and you haven’t made yourself available to the media. May I ask why?”

Reluctant even to answer such a question, Harry reminded himself that Gleason had been helpful, and seemed like a nice enough man. “This won’t go into the paper?” he asked; Gleason shook his head. “It’s partly what Kingsley said, about my privacy, but also, I haven’t had the greatest experiences with the media.” He assumed he didn’t need to go into details, that Gleason would know what he was referring to.

Gleason nodded, somewhat sadly, Harry thought. “I understand; we in the media have discussed it, and we thought that to be the most likely reason. It’s very understandable, though I would point out that your troubles stemmed from the actions of one reporter—in that case, Skeeter—and then, from the Ministry, not the Prophet itself. I think that if you talked to us, you would not find cause to regret it.”

Harry almost brought up what happened to Hermione, then remembered that it wasn’t the kind of thing he wanted to publicize further. He nodded. “I understand. Maybe I will, sometime; I just don’t

feel ready yet. But I do want to thank you for your advice. It was helpful.”

Gleason nodded his acknowledgement. Before Harry could turn to leave, Gleason spoke again. “Harry, I know you may not want to say anything, but while you’re standing here, I can’t resist... if you would just give a quick answer, for publication...” Harry looked at Gleason expectantly, nonverbally conveying that while he made no promises of an answer, he would listen.

“It’s been said that you went out to the forest, expecting to be killed, to save the wizarding community,” said Gleason. Harry continued to give no reaction. “Through whatever luck, skill, or fortune, you survived, though he thought you dead. I think if I were in that situation, my legs would literally fail me. How did you walk out there?”

Harry’s eyebrows went up; he had been expecting to be asked how he had survived, which he would have refused to answer. Not expecting this question, and not having thought about it, he considered it. He didn’t want to explain that his death was necessary, or the Horcruxes, but he understood that that wasn’t the crux of Gleason’s question anyway. A full minute passed.

Finally, he answered. “I’m... I’m not sure. I don’t know that it’s even possible to answer the question.” He paused again. “I think it’s just something inside you. It’s like trying to say why you like lemon and not strawberry, or why you’re good at art but bad at math. I knew it had to be done, but I almost couldn’t, and I wouldn’t blame anyone who couldn’t. I don’t think I can give a better answer than that.”

Obviously affected, Gleason said quietly, “I think that’s a very good answer. Thank you very much, Harry.” Harry nodded and left, Kreacher following. Back at Grimmauld Place, Harry realized something, and spoke to Kreacher. “Kreacher, I just realized, what I said to that reporter... I was lucky that I survived, but Regulus died doing the same thing I did. That’s probably why I respect him so much. One day I will tell the story of what happened, and I’ll make sure that everyone knows what Regulus did.”

Tears started streaming down the elf's face. "Is that why Master Harry put up Master Regulus's portrait?" asked Kreacher between sobs.

Taken aback, and unwilling to admit the truth, Harry improvised. "I just thought it was a good reminder of what he did. I couldn't have done what I did, if not for that." Kreacher started to thank Harry, but started crying too hard to speak, and walked from the room.

Harry looked across the living room at the pile of mail, thought about returning to it, then lay back on the sofa. I think I need a break, he thought.

* * * * *

He was still on the sofa an hour later when Ron came through the fireplace. "Hi," he greeted Ron. The grim look on Ron's face reminded Harry of what had happened to Hermione. "How's she doing?"

"You heard, I see," said Ron. "Harry, I've never seen her this bad. It's just terrible. How did they find out?" Harry described his visit to Pinter's office; Ron shook his head. "Bastard. I'd have gone, but I wouldn't trust myself not to curse him. Anyway, I could only talk to her about it for a few minutes. Apparently she spent a half hour talking to her parents, but it didn't really do much good. She said they know why she did it, but they said that what she did violated their trust in her so much that they don't know what kind of relationship they can have with her. She was devastated, of course. Mum's going to try to talk to them, get them to understand the situation. I hope she can."

"She's still at the Ministry?"

Ron nodded. "Dad told her she could go home, but she said she wanted to stay. Her parents said they needed some time to think about things, or she'd still be with them, but since she can't, she'd rather be doing something. When I saw her, it seemed like she was trying not to cry most of the time. It's so unfair. We get honored like that, things are great, and then suddenly, bam! This hits her out of nowhere. And what's worse is, it wasn't like she had any choice. If she hadn't, her parents would probably be dead. Kind of like you and

the goblins, actually. You, we, had no choice, but they want your head on a platter anyway. Makes me wonder what's coming for me."

"Nothing, I hope," said Harry. "At least one of us should be able to avoid unfair harassment. That reminds me, I talked to a guy from the Prophet today," He went on to describe his visit to Gleason's office.

"Stupid goblins," said Ron angrily. "I never liked them, but I didn't know why. At least, now I know why. I don't know how Bill works with them." An idea seemed to hit Ron. "Speaking of which, maybe we should visit Bill, talk to him about this. He might have some ideas."

Harry was less than enthusiastic; he wanted to just forget about the situation. "Do we have to?"

Ron was slightly taken aback. "No, we don't have to. Just a thought."

They sat in silence for a minute. "I guess I should get to the mail pile," he said resignedly.

"Tell you what, let me look at it. I'll probably find it more interesting than you will." Harry gestured him to go ahead, and Ron got up and sat at the table. There was silence for a few minutes. Finally Ron observed, "You seem to be quite a guy."

"So I've heard," Harry replied indifferently.

"You could really get a big head reading these. One woman hopes you'll marry her daughter. Well, she says 'someone like you,' but it's obvious she means you. They should auction you off, could raise quite a bit of money."

Harry couldn't help but chuckle. "They could pay off the money the goblins want."

"You could always pay it off," said Ron. "Of course, you'd be totally mental to do it."

"I was going to say," agreed Harry. "I don't think that's going to happen."

Opening the next letter, Ron's tone became one of astonishment. "They're offering you five thousand Galleons for an interview!"

"Yeah, that's the third one of those. Highest amount it's been, though."

"They only offered me one thousand," said Ron, his voice neutral, but with a slight emotional charge, as if he wanted Harry to take notice of what he said.

"I didn't know they did that," said Harry. "Are you going to do it?"

"I hadn't planned to," said Ron. "How would you feel about it?"

Harry knew he would rather Ron didn't, but didn't want to say it so directly, given Ron's attitude about Harry's money. "Well, I'd pay you a thousand not to do it," he said, intending it to sound like a joke. "But it's up to you, you should do what you want."

"Your deal sounds good, I could make a lot of money that way. But no, the money from the Merlin award is pretty good, especially with having no expenses. I'll definitely be buying some stuff, the first one of those comes."

"Just don't put it in Gringotts," advised Harry.

Ron chuckled darkly. "You may be the famous one, but I suspect they wouldn't mind getting their claws on me, either."

"I'm sure that's true," Harry agreed, and went silent. He was glad that Ron didn't plan on relating his experiences; he couldn't stop Ron, and wouldn't try, but it would still feel like an invasion of his privacy if Ron or Hermione went into great detail publicly about it, and he was sure that for a thousand Galleons, they would want every single detail. He also wondered how eager Ron would be to relate the part of the story where he ran out on them. He suddenly had another thought. "Have you gotten any fan mail?"

"A little," said Ron distractedly as he read. "Not nearly as much as you, though, and not so... what's the word, over the top, I guess. Mine is mostly, hey, nice job helping Harry out there. Not that I need it, but it's nice, I guess."

After another few minutes, Ron said, "Hey, this one is from Luna!"

Harry perked up. "Go on, read it to me."

Ron read. "Dear Harry, thank you very much for mentioning my name at the ceremony. Ginny was pretending to be unhappy that you said my name before hers." Harry and Ron exchanged a smile. "Michael Corner was unhappy that our names were mentioned but his wasn't, and I don't think he was pretending." Now Harry and Ron laughed out loud.

"Never did like Corner that much," said Harry.

Ron agreed. "Yeah, I heard he did a lot there, but me neither."

Ron went on reading. "We miss you here. Some people are pretty disappointed that you didn't come back, but I think I understand. Sometimes your insides just tell you something, and you have to do it. Maybe you don't even know why. But just remember that we respect you and we love you (well, maybe not Michael, but most of us), and we'll be there for you if you ever need us. Your friend, Luna." Ron raised his eyebrows. "I'm impressed. She seems to understand you pretty well."

"Maybe better than I understand myself," agreed Harry. "But yes, that was very... nice." He didn't want to say it out loud, but he felt very emotionally affected by the letter. He had always appreciated Luna's straightforwardness, but especially now.

A half hour later, Ron finished. "There, that wasn't so bad," he teased Harry.

"It wasn't so bad because you did it," responded Harry. "Okay, I've decided that you were right. We'll go see Bill, see what he has to say."

Ron nodded. "What made you decide that? Or, what made you not want to before?"

"I'm just not sure it's going to do any good, from what that Gleason guy said. But maybe Bill will know something interesting." Ron suggested a quick stop at the Burrow, and Harry agreed.

They had barely come out of the fireplace when Molly corralled Ron, asking him a few more questions about Hermione's situation, then telling him that a lot of mail was waiting in his room, and he should go answer it. His back to his mother, Ron gave Harry a quick 'what can you do?' look, and went upstairs.

"Harry, dear," said Molly, "would you come have a word with me in the kitchen?" Harry nodded, and went in; she motioned him to a seat at the table.

"How are you doing, Harry?" she asked.

"Okay," he said.

"Harry, I wanted to talk to you about a few things. First of all, Ron," she said, lowering her voice. "He got an offer today for a thousand Galleons to give an interview to Witch Weekly."

"I know, he told me."

"Did you tell him to do it?" she asked expectantly.

He shrugged. "I told him it was up to him."

She looked at him disapprovingly. "He wants to do it, Harry. He didn't say it directly, but a mother can tell. The only reason he doesn't is because he knows you don't want him to. If you would tell him he should do it, he would."

Harry's confusion appeared on his face. "But I don't think he should do it."

“Sometimes, Harry, it’s not a bad thing to tell a white lie. Not that I advocate lying in general,” she hastened to add, “but there can be exceptions. He wants to do it, and it won’t hurt you if he does. What’s the harm?”

“No harm, Mrs. Weasley, but I just don’t want to lie to Ron.” Certainly not about this, Harry added to himself.

“Well, that’s very admirable, Harry, but you should really think about it. Ron hasn’t had much money all his life, and this would be very nice for him. Now,” she continued before he had a chance to respond, “I wanted to say that you should really be going over to Bill and Fleur’s every now and then. I know it’s only been a week, but both good and bad habits can form quickly. It’ll be a good thing to get in the habit of doing. Remus wanted you to be an important person in that baby’s life.”

She paused just long enough for him to jump in, which he had been trying to do while not interrupting. “Ron and I were just on our way over there.”

She brightened a little. “Well, that’s good, dear. Good for you.” For some reason, the last comment annoyed him greatly; he felt he was being condescended to. He was sorely tempted to say, ‘Is there anything else you think I should be doing?’ but managed to hold back.

“Next, there’s your Muggle family. The situation with Hermione made me remember that your Muggle relatives had to go into hiding, and they may not know that it’s safe to come out. Now, I know they’re not the nicest people in the world—“

“That’s a huge understatement,” he couldn’t stop himself from interrupting.

“But they protected you for those years,” Molly went on, with an admonishing glance for the interruption. “Not that you owe them so much, but you do at least owe them for that. You really should check on them.

"Now, there's just one other thing," she went on; he came very close to rolling his eyes. "I'm leaving soon to go talk to Hermione's parents. I assume you know about that situation from Ron. I thought it might be a good idea if, not right now but maybe later, you were to talk to them. Try to explain to them your relationship with Hermione, why it was so important for her to come with you."

"Well, obviously, I would do anything I could to help Hermione. The next time I get a chance to talk to her, I'll offer to do that, tell her that I'll do anything she wants me to do." Not anything you want me to do, he added in his mind. Anything she wants me to do.

Seemingly not totally satisfied but having nothing more to say, she excused herself and went through the fireplace. Harry walked upstairs and found Ron in his room. He sat down and in frustration related the conversation to Ron, who seemed baffled at Harry's anger. "That's just Mum, Harry. What are you gonna do?"

"I really don't feel like being told what to do right now! Not by her, not by anybody."

"So, do what the rest of us do," said Ron reasonably. "Nod real earnestly, as if of course you were going to do what she said anyway, don't say anything, and just ignore what she said if you don't like it. No big deal." He gave Harry a small grin. "Ah, I think I get it. You don't have practice at this. You didn't have to worry with your aunt, because you knew she didn't like you anyway. You don't want Mum not to like you, but you don't want her doing that. Don't worry, Harry. You'll get used to it. You know we consider you like a part of the family; well, you're now finding out that's not always a good thing."

Harry was calming down, finding that what Ron had said helped. "I see what you mean... I'm just really not in the mood for it. You'd think she'd know that."

Ron shook his head. "Blind spot. And Harry, I do want to say, she was wrong about that. Okay, I'd love a thousand Galleons. And I know you'd give it to me, so let's not even have that discussion. I think she just wants me to have the choice, without any outside influence. But... Hermione and I did a lot to help you, but nobody

would be interested in the story if not for all the stuff you did. Getting money from it would be like getting paid for something you did, and it wouldn't seem right. I'd rather just take the money from you than do that."

Harry was touched. "Thanks, Ron, I appreciate that."

With a straight face, Ron said, "No problem. So, when should I come over to get the money?"

Harry laughed. "Any time is fine."

"Well, maybe later. Let's go over to Bill's."

* * * * *

A few minutes later, Ron came out of Bill and Fleur's fireplace, followed by Harry. "Hi, Fleur," said Harry. "Where's Teddy?"

Fleur looked grim. "With his grandmother. We thought it was not the best atmosphere for him to be here tonight."

Bill walked into the living room, greeted Harry and Ron, gesturing them onto the sofa. "Why is that?" asked Harry.

Looking only a little less unhappy than his wife, Bill answered. "I quit my job today." Responding to Harry and Ron's shocked expressions, he elaborated. "Well, quit under pressure, you could say. It wasn't a great surprise; I had known this might happen, and as the situation escalated, it became more and more likely. What made me quit was that today, they told me that I would be required to submit to questioning under Veritaserum if I wanted to keep my job."

Harry's mouth hung open. "Because of what we did?"

"Harry, you two and Hermione are in no way responsible for this," said Bill firmly. "What you did saved our society. It was just bad luck for me that it happened to involve Gringotts. They were already suspicious of me because I'm Ron's brother, but then they heard Griphook's story. He's in trouble with them, I hear; I think they gave

him Veritaserum too, or the goblin version of it. They know he 'conspired' with you in my home, and they would've asked me what involvement I had in it. Obviously there was none, but my future there was clearly to be measured in days, not years, so I thought, why let them drain me of any information they want before they let me go. And I object to the Veritaserum on principle."

Harry shook his head. "Bill, I'm so sorry..." Noting Bill's look, he added, "I know, I know, it's not our fault. But still... what are you going to do?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure yet, but I'm not without skills. I'm sure there's something. Fleur was thinking that we might go to France, and I'd definitely consider that, though we wouldn't be eager to move away from Teddy. But first I want to take a little time to just relax. We have money saved, it's not a problem. But let me ask you, why did you come? To see Teddy?"

"Partly," Harry lied, and went on to tell the story of his visit with Gleason. "I've read his stuff," said Bill when Harry finished. "He's pretty good, and I agree with most of what he said. The thing with the baby and the Knut, I think, is not as bad as he said. Maybe fifty-fifty. Still horrible, of course, I'm just used to it."

"I am not," put in Fleur. "The more I heard about them, the less I liked them. I think this may be, how do you say, a hidden blessing."

"A blessing in disguise," Bill corrected her absently. "And you may be right. It's just a shock when it happens, but we'll see. Of course, the other side of the coin, when looking for work, being Ron Weasley's brother may not be at all a bad thing right now," he added, with a wry grin at Ron. Harry felt that Bill was only partly kidding.

"Glad I could help," grinned Ron. "Just tell me who to call."

"So, you think there's nothing I should be doing," said Harry.

"No, I think Gleason was right on that. Just lie low, stay out of it."

“Well, that’s lucky, as it seems to be my specialty these days,” said Harry dryly.

They talked for a while about the goblin situation, then the topic turned to Teddy. Bill and Fleur told Harry, to his surprise, that he was not expected to ever take legal custody of Teddy, especially not while Andromeda was alive, and wanted to be the primary caregiver. “‘Godfather’ can have various meanings,” explained Bill. “It can mean ‘expected to take full custody,’ but only if it’s explicitly stated in a will. More commonly, it’s intended to establish a relationship between the parents’ friend and the child, assigning that adult a special importance in the life of a child. But if close relatives of the parents are alive, they normally take custody.” Relief washed over Harry as Bill looked at him, bemused. “Yes, I did notice before that you seemed a little freaked out over the whole thing.”

Mildly annoyed at being made fun of, Harry’s response was a little defensive. “I’d think most people my age would be. I mean, Ron, how would you feel if someone said, here, you’re responsible for this baby now?”

“I’d be like, uh, you first, mate.” Harry looked at Bill as if to say, there, you see?

Bill chuckled. “Relax, Harry, I wasn’t trying to give you a hard time. It was just a little funny, but I didn’t mean you were any different from anyone else.”

“Hermione, on the other hand, would go to the library and borrow ten books on babies and being a parent,” Ron joked. The topic moved to Hermione and her situation; as they talked, Harry reflected that in addition to those who had died, both Hermione’s and Bill’s lives had taken drastic turns for the worse as a result of what they had done. He hoped the cost would not rise any higher.

* * * * *

The next morning went as most of his mornings had, beginning with a humorous visit from Fred. Fred didn’t startle him in any way, but propped on a chair near the bed was a large sign reading, “This Is

Fred. I Do Not Want To Startle You. May I Appear?" Fred appeared soon thereafter, explaining that he had caused the sign to appear by 'special supernatural powers.' "Would those powers," asked Harry, "include the ability to talk to George and ask him to do this while I was asleep?" Fred's wounded innocence confirmed Harry's suspicions. He wondered how long Fred would keep appearing in the morning.

Breakfast was a more elaborate affair than usual, confirming that Kreacher had been very touched by Harry's putting up Regulus's portrait. Harry was annoyed at himself for not having predicted Kreacher's reaction, and realized to his dismay that he now could not take it down without greatly upsetting Kreacher.

The Prophet's main headline was about the ceremony, and to Harry's surprise, there were individual profiles of Ron and Hermione, giving more information about their background and relationship to him. The secondary article, also on page one, was the one about the goblins that he'd read the draft of the day before, now with information he and Kreacher had provided. There was also a box with the text, 'My Meeting With Harry Potter: Editorial on Page 20.' Reflexively, he turned to it; it was written by David Gleason.

This is the first time I have ever written an editorial, and it will probably be the last; I am primarily a news reporter. But a news reporter must be completely objective, and I can in no way be objective in writing about the young man I met for the first time yesterday.

He has been hailed as a hero, deservedly so, and been honored by society and individuals in almost every way imaginable. I would not be surprised to see statues go up soon. So, what struck me the most about him was his utter lack of pretension. Refusing to take himself too seriously, he was polite not only to me, but also to his house-elf! Readers may think it was a performance for my benefit, but a veteran reporter knows when a 17-year-old is putting on a show. Mr. Potter most definitely was not; this is who he is.

Growing more embarrassed, Harry read Gleason's account of their meeting, including his concern about the goblin situation, and a more detailed account of Kreacher's narrative than had appeared in the

main article. The editorial concluded with the last question he had asked Harry.

In that moment, I felt I truly saw his character; his eyes took on that unmistakable look of one thoughtfully trying to answer a difficult question. He felt he came up empty, but thinking about it later, I feel it was the only answer he could give. One either has this bravery within himself, or he does not. But what I saw that was most striking was an ineffable quality in those vivid green eyes: that he had looked Death in the face, and not flinched. It was both inspiring and haunting, to know that so much was asked of, and given by, one so young. I could not help but feel that this has affected him in ways even he does not realize.

I can't help but feel, thought Harry sardonically, that he saw a lot more in my eyes than there was to see. At least it's better than when the press was spreading lies about me, but it still seems way too much.

He walked into the living room. The mail pile was stacked even higher than usual; must be because of the ceremony yesterday, he thought. Strange to think that was only yesterday, so much has happened since then. A rather thick envelope caught his eye; he picked it up, and saw that it was from Narcissa Malfoy. Great, he thought. Just wonderful.

With a sigh, he opened it. To his surprise, there was a thick velvet case, from which he pulled out a small mirror. He immediately realized what it was for. Figuring he'd just get it over with, he spoke into the mirror. "I'm here. I assume this means you want to talk."

There was no immediate answer, but he realized that there probably wasn't someone looking at the mirror all the time. He put it down on the desk and picked up a letter. One fan letter and one business opportunity later, he heard a female voice. "I am here, Potter."

He picked it up and saw her face, which looked older than he remembered. Maybe it was the few minor scars he could make out, or maybe the stress of the past few years. Nothing she didn't ask for,

he reminded himself. "I guess this means you want my help."

"I want to know why you have hidden from everyone my role in all of this," she said coldly. "This shows bad faith on your part. Without me, it would not have been possible."

"I don't need to explain myself to you," he responded, summoning to his attitude his dislike of the whole Malfoy family. "And I haven't 'hidden' your role, I just haven't talked about the whole thing at all. I just don't want to."

"You talked to that lickspittle Gleason, who now fawns on you like a house-elf might to a 'polite' master who does not know the proper relationship between a master and a house-elf." Her tone was impressively haughty, but Harry realized that she must have been very angry at Harry seeming to enhance his status as a hero at her expense, in her eyes. She probably thinks I sought it out, he thought, like Draco always accused me of.

"I answered one and only one question, and again, I'm not going to explain or defend myself to you. I just don't want to talk about what happened. I can't stop you from telling anyone you want, so go ahead."

She glared at him disdainfully. "I would not be believed, as you well know."

"If you tell the media, or the Ministry, the accurate facts of what happened, I'll confirm it," he conceded. "If you lie or exaggerate, I'll contradict you. And if you omit your motivation from your story, I'll make it clear when they ask me."

"I saved your life! My motivation is irrelevant!"

"Not to me!" Harry responded with equal force. "It makes a lot of difference to me. Deal with it."

She seemed to be trying to hold her temper in check. "I expect you to—"

He cut her off. "I don't like the word 'expect.' How about, 'request.' 'Want' is also okay."

He knew he was infuriating her, but he didn't care; he would not let himself be pushed around. "I want you to tell your friend Shacklebolt, and the Wizengamot if necessary, that my husband and my son must not be prosecuted."

He shook his head. "I'm willing to consider intervening for you and Draco—"

Outraged, she interrupted him. "I did not ask for myself! I have done nothing that the Wizengamot would prosecute!"

"I'd think that assisting Voldemort would be enough, not to mention keeping captives illegally in your dungeon—"

"It was not illegal! It was authorized by the government at that time!"

In his disdain, Harry gave an exaggerated shrug. "If you want to argue that, you can, but I wouldn't recommend it. I think Kingsley and the Wizengamot don't consider the last government legitimate, since it was controlled by Voldemort. But that's up to you."

Again, he was conscious of her attempts to calm down. "We did not choose to keep them there. The Dark Lord ordered it, and we had no choice but to obey. We were being coerced at that time, and had been for a long time."

Harry nodded. "I don't know that for a fact, but the possibility that it's true is the only reason I'm talking to you now. Anyway, if you're not asking my help for yourself, that's fine. As I said, for Draco, I'm willing to consider it. But for your husband, it's out of the question. I won't even discuss it. He's done so much—"

"How dare you!" she raged, pent-up anger spilling out. "You have no idea, you filthy half-blood, what a wizard's debt is! You lying, weaselly, arrogant snake, with your blood traitor and Mudblood friends, it's people like you who—"

As soon as she said the word 'Mudblood,' that tore it for Harry; he immediately felt the emotional impact of what had happened to Hermione, the price she'd paid for taking extreme measures to save her parents. He quickly shoved the mirror back into its case; Narcissa's rant ceased. He picked up his quill, got a piece of paper, and wrote.

"Narcissa: You have a peculiar way of dealing with people whose help you're asking for. I'll talk to you, but I won't listen to insults or tantrums. I'll check the mirror at 10:00 a.m. tomorrow. If you do the same thing again, I'll put it away, and never look at it again. I'd also recommend that you stay away from the word 'Mudblood.'

"I won't consider helping your husband because I have a personal issue with him. He is directly responsible for the near-death, and great emotional trauma, of a close friend of mine. It involves Tom Riddle's diary. Your husband appeared at Voldemort's side the night he returned. I saw him pledge loyalty to Voldemort with my own eyes, and he stood there and watched while I was tortured and almost killed. Hermione was tortured at your home, which would not have happened if your husband had made different choices. I know that you and Draco may have been drawn into the situation against your will. But not him.

And yes, I know what a wizard's debt is. It saved my life once. But as far as I'm concerned, it applies only to you, and your motivation matters. I'll consider helping Draco, but there will be conditions, questions I'll need answered. Politely. You know, as I might speak to a house-elf."

Relishing the sarcasm of his last sentence, he addressed the letter and placed it where he usually put outgoing mail. He spent an hour going through it, finding the rest much less unpleasant than the first.

* * * * *

He did nothing special for the rest of the morning. After lunch, it occurred to him that much as he'd prefer not to admit it, Molly did have a point when she'd said that he needed to check on the

Dursleys. He wrote Hestia Jones a quick owl, asking her to get in contact with him sometime soon.

Soon after he sent the owl, the fireplace lit up, and Hermione walked through. It was the first time he had seen her since the ceremony, and since her parents had found out what she'd done. He stood, looking at her with concern. "Hi there. How are you doing?"

She seemed to be trying to look happier than she felt, but failing. "Not very well, as you might guess."

"I'm so sorry—"

"It's not your fault, Harry," she replied, in a tone that suggested she would start becoming angry at any further apologies. "It was my decision, and I'd do the same thing again. That's the worst part of this. I know that what I did to them was terrible, but what else could I do? I apologized to them over and over, but they said, we want to know that you would do it differently if you had it to do over again. I just couldn't say that. My father said, then we have nothing to say to each other." She looked on the verge of tears; he wondered how much she had cried since she'd found out. "They'd want me to say that I'd not do what I did, that I'd keep my head down and not fight Voldemort."

He started to apologize again, but caught himself. "If they'd want you to say that, they must not know you very well."

She winced. "My mother said that, but her meaning was different. Anyway, I'm sorry, Harry, I didn't come here to cry on your shoulder about this. Well, partly maybe. I wanted to see how you were doing, and tell you about this morning. The Wizengamot, at least the part that hasn't been arrested, talked to me an hour ago; they're talking to Ron now."

"What for?"

"They want our feedback on certain people. They're trying to figure out who was helping Voldemort, they're talking to most Order members, and anyone known to have resisted Voldemort. They're interested in talking to you, but I told them that there was nothing you

knew that Ron and I didn't know; I tried to discourage them from talking to you. I think it may have worked."

He felt bad that she was trying to help him when she was in a very bad situation herself. "Thanks."

She shrugged. "We know how you feel, and really, they don't need to talk to you. You might be interested to know, they asked about Malfoy."

"Narcissa too?"

"No, just Lucius and Draco. About Draco, I told them about that thing he did last year with the cabinets, helping Death Eaters get into Hogwarts. It didn't directly cause any deaths, but it easily could have. And of course I mentioned the two attempts against Professor Dumbledore, but I think they knew about that. They asked if I knew of any Hogwarts students who helped Voldemort. At first I couldn't think of any except for Malfoy and Goyle, but then I mentioned that thing where Parkinson said that they should grab you."

Harry grinned, causing Hermione to give a small grin of her own. "They won't arrest her for that, though."

"No, but they might at least interview her. She's always been so horrible to us, all those years, so I don't mind if she sweats a little about this. I'm not above a little payback. Also, since she was Malfoy's girlfriend, they might think she knows something."

"But they don't know she's Malfoy's girlfriend."

She affected a casual air. "I may have mentioned it."

Harry grinned again. "As well you should. By the way, there was another message from his mother this morning." He told her the story; she shook her head in disgust. "She probably thinks you're arrogant because you insist she treats you like an equal, without insulting anyone. They think calling people Mudbloods and being superior is their birthright. So, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know," he said. "I'm curious, how would you feel if I helped Malfoy? Draco, I mean?"

"I'm not sure. I've read about wizard's debts, but it's not clear how transferable to other people they are. If you did it, I could understand why, but I'd hate for you to do it, and then have him cause someone's death in the future. But we can't get inside his mind. I'm sorry, but I think you'll have to go with your gut on this one."

They talked for a while longer, after which she left to go back to the Ministry to help Arthur. He found that something she'd said about the Malfoy situation had given him an idea. He went to the desk in the living room, took out a piece of paper, and composed a letter to Horace Slughorn.

* * * * *

In the late afternoon, he was writing a reply to Luna's letter from the day before when the fireplace lit up again. Thinking it was Ron this time, he was surprised to see Hestia Jones walk through. He recalled that as she was an Order member, she would have access to the house. He walked over to greet her; she gave him a friendly hug. "It's good to see you, Harry. I got your owl, of course. What's up?"

"Well, I thought I should go talk to the Dursleys. Now that this is over, they can go back to their usual lives, but they may not know. Do you think Dedalus would have told them by now?"

She glanced down, troubled. "I'm sorry, Harry... I thought you knew. He died a few months ago. Well, not really died, but... they caught him, and..." She sighed heavily. "Dementors."

Harry cringed, and shook his head in sorrow. After a moment's silence, he asked, "What happens to their bodies, anyway? Their soul is gone, how can they live? Do they die?"

"The bodies can live indefinitely," she explained. "They just need to be given food and water, that sort of thing. It's up to the families whether to keep them alive or not; most do. Many are kept at St. Mungo's; they have a whole ward for them, after the recent dementor

attacks. Using magic, it doesn't take much effort to keep them alive, even though it seems like there's no point. But letting them die would involve starvation or dehydration, and euthanasia... well, it's still killing, even if it is an empty shell." Harry wondered about the disposition of Dennis's body.

"Anyway... you asked about the Dursleys. I'm sorry, Harry, but I don't know. Only Dedalus knew that. You know, in that kind of situation, there has to be compartmentalization of information. If there's some way to find them, I don't know what it is."

He nodded. "Okay, I understand. I know the Muggle world, so maybe there's some way I can find them." After a pause, he added, "I guess you're pretty busy, rounding up the people who helped the Death Eaters."

She grunted. "I wish we could round up all of them."

The way she had said the word 'all' suggested that there was some other problem than not being able to find them. "Why can't you?"

Her tone became very serious. "Harry, I've heard that you want to be an Auror. Is that true?"

He hesitated. "Well, I'm not sure right now what I'm going to end up doing. But yes, it's always been something I've been interested in doing."

"Well, we'd love to have you, of course. After what you've done, it's hard to imagine you not making it, even without a single N.E.W.T. But you have to understand that as with most aspects of society, there's division within the Auror ranks. A few fought alongside Kingsley, Tonks, and me, and some resisted as much as they could, quietly. But many just followed the Ministry's orders without question, even though they were wrong, and some went even further than that, exploiting the situation to advance their own power or interests in some way, or indulging in persecution of Muggle-borns in a way similar to Umbridge."

"I thought Kingsley was going to get rid of those kind of people."

“He wants to, but... you must not repeat this to anyone, anything I say here. Except Kingsley, he can know I told you.” Harry nodded. “The problem is, you can’t fire Aurors. They can only be gotten rid of for committing crimes, or disobeying the Ministry. The idea behind that rule is a good one; if Aurors could be fired easily, they could become politicized. But now, it’s causing real problems. We really need to get rid of those people, but as things stand now, we can’t. There are a number of Aurors who Kingsley knows he can’t trust, and they know he knows. He doesn’t ask them to do anything sensitive, but especially right now, we need every Auror, and we need them on the same page. We need to be united, but we’re not. So that’s a serious problem. Especially since though we need to be rounding people up, for the last few days, I’ve been overseas, part of Kingsley’s effort to find ways to deal with dementors. Because he needed us for that, he had to assign suspect Aurors to track down those who helped the Ministry, when some of them did that very thing... you see the problem.”

He nodded; it sounded bad. “I thought Aurors had to pass character tests.”

“We do, but people change, and circumstances change people. Some people became corrupted who probably never would have if Voldemort hadn’t come to power. Also, some of us think the tests need to be changed, but for reasons too complicated to get into, they can’t right now. The bottom line is that the Aurors are in a kind of crisis, and Kingsley has to deal with that on top of everything else.”

It just gets worse, thought Harry. “That made me wonder, why did it have to be Aurors who went? Why not just Ministry workers?”

“He could have had people at the Foreign Ministry do it,” she acknowledged, “but we need help quickly. Bureaucrats would sit on their hands, have endless discussions, and so forth. We met with other countries’ Aurors, trying to keep the governments out of it. Kingsley knew that was our only chance to get results quickly.”

“How did it go?”

“A few of us had some success overseas. Nothing to solve the problem completely, but it will help a lot. There may be a way to sense dementors within a certain radius, a little bit like a Sneakoscope. And we think we have enough reinforcing spells now to keep them out of Diagon Alley, which will be a big sign of progress. But we still haven’t found a permanent solution.”

“Well, it’s better than nothing,” he reluctantly agreed.

“It is indeed. Well, I should be getting back, but I need to talk to Kingsley first. Harry... he, Kingsley, told me that you had a permanent Portkey to his office. Do you mind if I use it? It would save me some time.”

“Sure. It’s...” With a little embarrassment, he described its location. With a slightly confused expression—he gathered that she didn’t know the Portkey’s shape—she thanked him and walked upstairs.

* * * * *

In a minute, she was standing in Kingsley’s office. Kingsley was sitting at his desk, three older wizards in formal robes sat in ornate chairs facing his desk. They were slightly startled to see Kingsley suddenly talk to someone behind them.

“Ah, Hestia,” he said. “Could I have a word? Excuse me, gentlemen, this won’t take more than a minute.” They nodded mutely, and Hestia followed him into a small room adjoining the office; it had two chairs and a sofa. She imagined that it was for the Minister to take a nap if he felt the need, but was sure that it had been used for other purposes by many a Minister. They sat on the sofa.

“Well?” he asked simply.

She nodded. “As we discussed.”

“How’s he doing?”

Sadly, she shrugged. “Maybe not much better than when you talked to him. He’s fairly engaged—he asked about the dementor situation—

but I don't think he's nearly ready to get involved. Did you talk to Ron and Hermione?"

"They didn't want to tell me," he nodded. "I had to shamelessly take advantage of my rank, and they made me swear not to tell anyone, so I'll honor that and not tell you. But Gleason was right; he walked into the forest, not expecting to return."

He could see the distress on her face. "We can't do this to him, Kingsley. He's been through too much."

"I know," said Kingsley heavily. "But... he's the only one who has a chance, Hestia. You know that, too."

"He can't possibly know what you'll be asking of him," she said quietly. "If he's successful... he'll never forgive us."

His face reflected his uncertainty. "If he's the person we think he is, I believe he will." He paused. "Eventually. The problem is, so much is at stake. The dementors, the Ministry, the Aurors, and the damn goblins..."

"Did you get word?"

He nodded. "It's confirmed. Three of our people have been there since Gringotts opened, posing as normal customers. Maybe five people have gotten into their vaults all day."

"Like we needed that," she muttered. "Are you going to go on the offensive, in the Prophet?"

"I've got little choice," he said. "We don't have a few million spare Galleons to give them, not that I would anyway. No, Gleason's coming in a half hour, and I'm going to let them have it with both barrels. If they play chicken with me, they're going to regret it."

She frowned in puzzlement. "Did you just start speaking a foreign language?"

He chuckled. "Sorry, I picked up some Muggle idioms working in the Prime Minister's office. I meant, I'm not going to back down."

"Oh. Well, I knew that."

"Is that all?"

She thought for a few seconds. "It has to be a last resort."

He nodded gravely. "I understand. By the time it happens, it may well be just that."

They stood; she reached the door before him. One hand on the knob, she turned to face him. "Oh, and for Merlin's sake, get him a new Portkey, will you? He's got that one under a cloth, behind a picture."

He nodded ruefully. "It was supposed to be humorous. I guess he isn't feeling too humorous these days."

"Would you?"

He shook his head. "I guess not."

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 5, Dudley's Letter: Finally making contact with the Dursleys, Harry gets shocking news; a discussion at the Weasleys' dinner table gives Harry an idea about how to counter the goblins' increasingly aggressive tactics.

From Chapter 5:

He could see on their faces their concern that Harry had learned a terrible secret. He gave full vent to his disgust and frustration. "I swear to God, you two have to be the worst parents in history. Dudley would have been better off if you'd beaten the crap out of him every day."

Chapter 5

Dudley's Letter

Harry was sorely tempted to put off until tomorrow the matter of the Dursleys, but he felt that if he did that, he would never get around to it. He had one lead: Smeltings.

Taking his Invisibility Cloak, he Apparated to 4 Privet Drive. It looked as immaculate as it had the day he'd left, except for the heavy layers of dust covering every surface. He thought about removing some of the dust with magic, but quickly realized that if he did some of it but not all, Petunia would complain when they got back. Better to do nothing, he thought, with a mild, resigned curse for the fate that had caused him to be raised by such a family.

He searched Dudley's bedroom, hoping that important records hadn't been removed. Finding nothing, he searched the rest of the house, but apparently the Dursleys had taken paperwork with them. He considered what to do, then rolled his eyes in annoyance at himself as he realized the obvious solution: call directory assistance.

Picking up the phone, he was again annoyed with himself as he realized that there was no dial tone. Of course, they'd have had it disconnected. He felt as if living in the Muggle world was a language he'd grown up with, but deteriorated due to disuse. Hoping it would work, he pointed his wand at the phone, and was rewarded with a dial tone. He got the phone number for Smeltings, called the school, and got its location.

He Apparated to Smeltings, and using the Suggestion Charm to cause those he met to be unusually helpful, soon was meeting with the deputy headmaster. A balding, humorless middle-aged man, he told Harry that Dudley had suddenly dropped out three months ago. Dudley had not been doing well in school, the man said, but had been expected to barely manage to graduate. He could think of no reasons for Dudley's actions, and didn't seem to care much.

Getting the location of Dudley's dormitory, he went there to talk to Dudley's former roommates. They didn't know much more; Dudley

had suddenly left one day. He had taken his most important possessions with him, so Harry was at least relieved to know that no foul play was involved. They referred him to a boxing gym that Dudley sometimes trained at.

Starting to feel like a private detective, like the kind he'd seen on TV who were always tracking people down and following leads, he went to the gym. Dudley wasn't there, but the manager was able to give him (again, under magical duress) an address. He reached the apartment and found a roommate who said Dudley wasn't in, suggesting first that he try the gym, then a park he was known to kill time in.

At the park, he finally found Dudley sitting on a bench facing an empty football pitch, three footballs lying a few yards in front of him. He walked over, using the Invisibility Cloak just in case Dudley saw him coming and tried to run away. After all this work, thought Harry, I'm not letting him get away.

When he was ten feet behind Dudley, he took off the Cloak and walked to Dudley's side with a wide berth, hoping not to startle him. "Dudley?"

Dudley turned his head quickly, and his mouth hung open. "Harry?"

Harry nodded. "How are you doing?" he asked, trying to sound casual.

Dudley stood, still shocked, and walked toward Harry. To Harry's great surprise, Dudley reached out to touch Harry's shoulder, then backed his hand away, as if remembering that he was doing something he shouldn't. Then, apparently abandoning all restraint, he lunged forward and threw himself onto Harry, wrapping him in a hug.

Harry was floored; he would have been less surprised if a large rabbit had appeared and told him he had to Hop to Heaven. Slowly, he reached an arm out to pat Dudley on the back. He didn't know Dudley's exact emotional state, but understood from his expression that it wasn't happiness. "It's okay, Dudley," he said. "Let's have a seat, okay?"

An embarrassed Dudley let go of Harry, and they sat on the bench. Harry could see that Dudley was very emotional, trying to hide it but not coming close to succeeding. "Dudley, what happened? What's going on?"

Dudley was a large young man, but his voice was small and confused. Nothing, Harry thought, like the arrogant and spoiled child he had known for so long; this was more like the Dudley he had seen most recently when saying goodbye, but even more emotional and unsure of himself. Dudley stared at the ground, silent for a few minutes. Harry waited patiently, wondering what in the world this was all about.

Dudley finally spoke, his voice quiet, laden with emotion. "I... after it happened, I wanted to find you, I wanted to talk to you. I went back to Privet Drive, even though I knew it was dangerous. I tried to use the fireplace, looked for some clue about where you might be, searched all over... I didn't find anything, I knew I wouldn't. And now, here you are. Why are you here, anyway? How did you find me?"

Harry felt that Dudley had something to tell him, but was putting it off. He described the afternoon's detective work, then remembering Dudley's first question, added, "The Voldemort thing... it's over. He's dead, our side won. Things... well, aren't perfect, but are much better. I was looking for you and your parents, to tell you that it's over, that you can go back to your normal lives."

Dudley took a deep breath. "I wish it was that easy."

Harry was now extremely curious. "Dudley, what happened?" he asked again.

Dudley seemed to want to speak, but kept opening his mouth, then hesitating, as if the words wouldn't come. Finally, slowly, they did. "It... it was about three months ago," he began. "We were renting a place up north, near Manchester. It was a long weekend, I was home for a visit." He took another deep breath, paused, then continued.

"It happened so fast, I just had no idea what was going on. It was like it happened to someone else. I was standing in the living room, Dad was watching TV, Mum was in the kitchen. Just like always." Another

pause; Harry waited patiently but expectantly. "All of a sudden, he was just there. Appeared, out of thin air."

"Who?"

"I didn't catch his name."

"I mean—"

"I know what you mean," said Dudley. "He was wearing a dark robe, and a kind of a hood. He pointed a wand at me, and said that word. I don't know what it was, it sounded like 'abracadabra.'"

Harry's mouth fell open; how had Dudley survived? "Avada Kedavra," he said. "It's called the Killing Curse."

Dudley nodded. "Somehow I knew that, even though I didn't. It was the way he said it, like a guy on TV might say 'you're dead' when he shoots you. Anyway... the next thing I knew, I was behind him."

Confused, Harry assumed Dudley had explained it incorrectly. "You mean, he turned around?"

"No," said Dudley gravely. "I mean, I was standing in one place, in front of him, and then I was suddenly standing behind him. The curse was about to hit me when it happened."

A chill went through Harry; his jaw dropped. "Oh, my God..." He now felt he understood what had shaken Dudley so badly. Raised as he was by people who hated wizards, it couldn't have been a pleasant thing to find out. "Then what happened?"

"He turned around. He was really surprised, but probably not as much as I was. Everything was happening on reflex. Somebody attacks you, what do you do? I hit him. One punch, laid him out. He's lying there, on his side, he'd dropped his wand."

Harry still wondered how Dudley and his family had escaped; their assailant, even wandless, could have made his way back to

Voldemort, who would have sent more wizards. He knew there was more to the story. "And then?"

"I was in shock; at that time, I don't think I had really understood what had happened," Dudley said, still speaking quietly and slowly. "But I was also really angry. Somebody had tried to kill me. He reached for his wand. I reached down fast, grabbed it, pointed it at him. It was almost like, like I said, a reflex... this bright orange stuff, like... I don't know, liquid fire, I'd never seen anything like it, came shooting out of the wand..." Dudley swallowed. "Suddenly, half his face looked like it had been in the oven too long. He was dead."

Oh, my God, Harry thought but this time did not say. Oh, my God... Now Harry understood why Dudley had dropped out of school, spent his days sitting in a park. He imagined what Dudley had gone through. "It wasn't your fault, Dudley," Harry said gently. "You didn't even know you could do it. You couldn't control it. It wasn't your fault."

The expression on Dudley's face told Harry that Dudley had been waiting a long time to hear someone say that, but at the same time, wasn't sure whether he believed it. "Mum absolutely freaked. Started making noises, but nothing I could understand as words. Dad looked at me as if I was some creature from another planet that had taken over his son." He glanced up at Harry. "I wasn't sure he was wrong. I felt like it was all a dream, except I knew I wasn't going to wake up. But it had that feeling."

"Then, it starts dawning on me that there's a dead body in the living room, which is going to be hard to explain to the police if we call them. I've watched enough TV shows to know not to touch the body. I was wondering what to do about it when I realized I could use the wand. I pretended I was holding the end of a rope, and I started dragging it. His body started moving. Mum screamed at me to stop. I said something like, what were you planning to tell the police when they come to pick this up? I kept on moving it, and got it into the backseat of the car. I drove to someplace abandoned, and dragged it out. I checked the pockets, the robe, to make sure he hadn't written down our address, or anything else connected to us. He hadn't." He paused again. "I haven't been back home since then."

Harry was surprised. "Why not? They had to know it wasn't your fault."

Dudley looked at Harry as if Harry were slow-witted. "You, of all people, shouldn't have to ask that question. You know how they feel about wizards. I knew they'd never want to see me again."

"I really doubt that," said Harry.

"Are you kidding?" shot back Dudley. "Why should they?"

"You're their son. They love you."

Dudley laughed derisively. "They loved me because I wasn't you! Now I am you! Worse than you!" At Harry's raised eyebrows, Dudley waved a hand dismissively. "You know what I mean. To them. At least, you used that to save my life. I used it to kill someone. What does that make me?"

"Someone who did what he had to do," responded Harry forcefully. "Did it occur to you, Dudley, that if you hadn't done that, you and your family would be dead?"

"Well, maybe, but—"

"Not maybe. No doubt at all. He would've reported back, and Voldemort would've sent out a team. Dudley," Harry said, now more gently, "The wizard who helped you go into hiding is now dead, and I think I can piece together what happened. They caught him, almost certainly tortured him, and killed him after he finally told them your location. The Dark wizard who tortured him, probably the only one who knew the information, went to your house. He was going to kill you, then torture your parents, who didn't know anything. Finally realizing that—and who knows how much torture it would have taken for him to be sure—they enjoy that sort of thing—he would have killed them. There's just no doubt. I think you reacted instinctively, but not out of evil—out of self-protection, yourself and your family. You saved their lives."

Dudley shook his head. "Maybe, but... there's something else. When I did that, whatever I did, there was this feeling of... power, of pleasure. It felt good to get back at him for what he had done. I'm sure good wizards don't feel that way."

Harry never would have imagined that he would feel bad for Dudley as he did now. "Dudley... I'm going to tell you something I've never told anyone, and I'd like you not to repeat it." Surprised, Dudley nodded. "Last week, an enemy, a really bad wizard, spat in the face of someone I liked and respected. I was so angry that I did a spell that tortures someone." Dudley's eyes went wide. "Only for a second or two. He'd tortured lots of other people, and I knew that, so I felt like he deserved it. And unlike you, I did it consciously, it wasn't reflexive. And I felt very satisfied right after I did it. It wasn't until later that I started to feel bad.

"Later that night, I defeated Voldemort in a duel, and now I'm a hero in the wizarding world. People want to meet me, shake my hand, give me awards. I get letters telling me how wonderful I am. But still, I did that. You know, Dudley, what's the difference between a good wizard who does what I did, and a bad one?"

Dudley shook his head.

"The good ones," said Harry, "feel bad about it later. The bad ones don't."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Looking down, Dudley suddenly said, "I wasn't very nice to you. For a long time."

Harry understood from Dudley's tone that it had been a very difficult thing for him to say. "Do you feel bad about it?"

Slowly, Dudley nodded. "See, there you are," said Harry. Dudley chuckled a little. "That proves your point, huh?"

"I think so," said Harry.

After another pause, Dudley spoke again. "There's something else I wanted to tell you. Like I said, I went back to Privet Drive, and looked through anything they'd left there, any records. I found this."

He handed Harry an envelope; he recognized it as being from Hogwarts, the letter inviting Harry to attend Hogwarts. Harry chuckled. "We got dozens of these, I'm sure you remember. Why did she keep this one?"

"Open it."

Harry did, and it was the same letter he remembered... except that the name of the one being invited to attend Hogwarts was Dudley Dursley. Harry was even more shocked to see this than he was to hear that Dudley had done magic.

"Yeah, I felt like that, only more so," said Dudley, clearly having noted Harry's expression. "I wonder... how my life would have been..."

"I can really understand that," Harry agreed.

Dudley turned to Harry. "I want to see your world."

Harry could understand that too. "I'll talk to some people. There must be other cases like this, where people who should have gone to Hogwarts didn't. Maybe adult education classes, like that. I'll look into it."

"Don't tell anyone..."

"I understand," Harry assured him. "Don't worry, I won't. It's funny; you killed a bad guy, for sure. If people knew, you'd be a little bit of a hero, too. Not many people fought back."

"I don't want people to think I'm a hero. Not for this."

"Join the club," said Harry. "We'll have to get you a wand, of course."

Dudley shrugged. "This one seems to work fine," he said, pulling from his jacket the wand he'd taken from the Death Eater. He pointed it at

the footballs, which rose two feet into the air and started moving horizontally, equidistant on the edge of an imaginary circle. They moved for ten seconds, then fell to the ground.

"That's really good," said Harry, impressed. "I'm not sure I could do that."

"You probably could if it was the only thing you tried to do, two hours a day, for three months," said Dudley. "I come here, at this time, because nobody's ever here, and because I want to get away from people. I feel like there's a good reason to do this, but I'm not sure what it is."

"It's a very good idea," agreed Harry. "It gives you discipline, control over your power. You need to learn..."

"So it doesn't happen again," finished Dudley.

Harry nodded. "Partly, yes."

"Tell me about your world," asked Dudley.

"I will, but I'm afraid I can't right now. I have to get back. It took a long time to find you, and I still need to talk to your parents. Tomorrow I'll talk to some people, and see what should be done. I'll come back here at, let's say, three, and let you know. Is there anything you'd like me to tell your parents?"

Dudley thought for a minute, then shook his head. Harry felt like telling him he should say something, but held back; he hadn't liked it when Molly did it to him. Also, he knew Dudley's parents, and that his fear about their reactions might well be justified. He nodded, and stood.

Dudley did, as well. "Do you mind if I hang onto this?" Harry asked, holding up the Hogwarts letter. "It'll make whoever I talk to take your situation more seriously."

“Sure.” Harry asked for Vernon and Petunia’s address; Dudley wrote it out. He handed Harry the paper, then offered his hand. “Thanks, for... everything.”

Feeling great sympathy for Dudley, Harry shook it firmly. “Tomorrow, at three.” Dudley nodded, and Harry Disapparated.

* * * * *

Harry rang the doorbell of the Dursleys’ new home, then magically unlocked and unbolted it, pushing the door open. He had decided that he would not observe politeness and pleasantries, because he knew they wouldn’t. Anger on Dudley’s behalf fueled him.

The first thing he saw was Vernon, standing from his seat in front of the TV, shouting to Petunia. “Petunia, call—” He cut himself off as he recognized Harry; Petunia came running into the living room. “You can call the police if you want,” said Harry indifferently. “It wouldn’t do you much good.”

“That’s usually what you do when your home is broken into,” shouted Vernon defensively. “You people don’t think you have to knock?”

“Yes, because you’ve always been so polite to me in the past,” Harry retorted snidely. “I didn’t think you’d invite me in for tea.”

“It’s our decision who we invite into our home—”

“Fine, I won’t be long. I’m here to tell you that it’s all over. Voldemort is dead, there’s no more reason for you to worry about your safety. You can go back to Privet Drive.”

“Just like that,” Vernon said mockingly.

What the hell do they want me to say, thought Harry. “Well, it’s a very long story how it happened, quite a spellbinder, according to a bartender I told it to. But I don’t think you’d want to hear it.”

“How did you find us?” asked Petunia sharply.

"I found Dudley. He gave me the address."

Vernon and Petunia exchanged startled looks. "How—" started Petunia, who cut herself off, seemingly torn between the impulses to ask about Dudley, and not wanting to admit she needed any information from Harry.

"He's fine, thanks. He sends his love," Harry replied, his sarcasm much thicker than necessary. He could see on their faces their concern that Harry had learned a terrible secret. He gave full vent to his disgust and frustration. "I swear to God, you two have to be the worst parents in history. Dudley would have been better off if you'd beaten the crap out of him every day."

"How dare you—" Vernon roared, but Harry cut him off with equal vehemence.

"How dare I?" he repeated incredulously. "Your son is out there, alone, with major problems. He accidentally killed someone." Vernon and Petunia looked at each other again, stricken, their fears confirmed: someone else knew. "I saw someone murdered, and it was really bad for me. What do you suppose it's like for him? Did you even bother to check on him? Find out what he's up to?"

"He ran away!" shouted Vernon. "We checked with his school, they didn't know where to find him."

"I found him! Didn't take long, and I didn't use magic!" Well, not much, he added to himself. "You could if you wanted to, but you don't want to. And the worst thing is, it's not because he killed someone. That was an accident, and you know that. It's because your worst fear had come true. Dudley is a wizard."

"He is not a wizard!" screeched Petunia, nearly hysterical.

"They don't give these to just anyone!" said Harry, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out the Hogwarts letter. "They didn't give it to you!"

He didn't think a person could look as shocked as Petunia did. "How... you're crazy!" she yelled, recovering slightly.

Ah, thought Harry. Denial. Whatever. He didn't care whether she admitted it or not. Vernon reached over and grabbed the letter from Harry's hand; Harry made no effort to stop him. "Don't—" she sputtered. "It's a trick, it's fake..."

"You're pitiful," Harry said to Petunia contemptuously. A lot of the anger and frustration Harry had felt over the past year, that he had bottled up, was now coming out. A part of him knew it, but he didn't care. They deserved it, especially Petunia. "You didn't even tell him," he said, gesturing to Vernon, on whose face shock was deepening as he read the letter. "Just because your sister got something you didn't get, just because some boy broke a tree branch and hurt you..." The blood drained from her face; Vernon, having finished the letter, stared at Petunia. "You've spent a lifetime convincing yourself that wizards are awful, terrible people, all because of that. Well, you have one thing in common with the boy who hurt you, who found Dumbledore's letter to you. You both spent years taking it out on me for something someone else did to you. You'd better start getting used to it: this is a part of you, a part of your family. Don't like it? Too bad!"

Distraught, Petunia bolted, running for the stairs. She raced up them faster than he would have thought she could. He heard a door slam.

He was alone with Vernon, with whom he had no desire to talk. "I need that back," he said simply, reaching for the letter. Mute, stunned, Vernon paused for a few seconds, looked at it again, then handed it to Harry. "Where did you find that?"

"Dudley found it," Harry replied, and briefly explained the circumstances. "He was looking for me, he needed to talk to me. He was confused, scared. I'd think you could understand why. He didn't ask for this. It's just who he is."

"You talked to Dudley." Harry nodded. "Why didn't he come back here?"

“He thinks that’s the reaction he’s going to get,” Harry answered, gesturing upstairs. “I couldn’t exactly tell him it was nonsense. He saw how you and she treated me all those years, because I was a wizard—“

“That wasn’t the reason—“

“Then why hasn’t Dudley come back?” Harry said scornfully. “Tell yourself what you want, I don’t care. Banish him from here, or take him back; I don’t care about that either. But don’t you dare take him back on the condition that he not use magic, not be a wizard. This is who he is. Your wife tried to hide the truth from him, and look what happened. There’s a reason boys and girls go to Hogwarts: to learn to control it. That wouldn’t have happened if he’d known what he was. But she can’t accept it. You have to decide whether you can.” He turned to leave.

He was at the front door when Vernon spoke again, as if suddenly afraid that Harry would leave before he could speak. “Where is he?”

Harry believed Vernon truly wanted to know, but his disdain for him was enough that he wasn’t inclined to make it easy for him. “I found him, without magic. You can, too. Think of it as something you need to make an effort for if you want your son back.” Deciding to give Vernon one last reminder of what he was dealing with, instead of leaving by the front door as he’d intended, he Disapparated.

* * * * *

Upon Harry’s return to Grimmauld Place, Kreacher informed him that Molly had come by to invite Harry to a large family dinner planned for that evening. Kreacher had planned to have dinner ready for Harry upon his return, but had halted his plans pending Harry’s answer. Harry thanked Kreacher, and told him that he would eat at the Weasleys’.

He soon took the fireplace over, and was surprised and pleased to find every Weasley there except, of course, Ginny. Hermione, who seemed to have more or less taken up residence there, and Fleur were there as well, as was Fred’s ghost. Molly explained that now

that things were back to normal, and only one Weasley was attending Hogwarts, she wanted to institute a weekly custom in which the whole family would get together for dinner.

Asked about his day, Harry told them some of what had happened with Dudley, telling them that at Dudley's request, much of what had happened would be kept between them. He told them just that Dudley had Apparated without intending to, and that he had discovered that he had been invited to Hogwarts. Harry told them mainly because he felt he needed guidance regarding what to do in the situation. Molly told him that the Ministry had a social services department whose responsibility it was to deal with such situations, and that she would get in contact with them.

"What I'm surprised by, though, is the fact that Dumbledore allowed it, took no for an answer," said Arthur. "They lean pretty hard on parents to allow their children to go to Hogwarts, and for good reason. They don't know how to use their ability, can sometimes even kill people by accident." Harry struggled to remain expressionless. "There was never any indication?"

"Not that I ever saw," said Harry. "Probably it happened, and Petunia tried hard to find some other explanation for it, maybe blamed it on me. No way could her Duddykins ever become anything but a perfect child."

"She called him that?" asked Ron. "Now, I'm starting to feel sorry for him."

"Anyway," Harry continued, "I can imagine why Dumbledore did what he did. He knew Petunia and Vernon hated magic, and that the only way he was going to get Dudley away from there was by force. Petunia would have just lost it, and he needed their cooperation in keeping me safe. I'd guess he had his priorities, and he didn't want to push it."

"I guess this is going to be pretty hard for him," commented Hermione.

You don't know the half of it, he thought. "Yeah, especially since he was raised to think that wizards are lower than pond scum."

“Well, Harry,” said Molly, “I’m sure you’re exaggerating—“

Harry surprised himself with his own vehemence. “I’m not,” he exclaimed. “I’m really not. Arthur, you remember things being thrown at you, right?”

Arthur nodded. “And after you left, there were some insults bandied about, mostly relating to the fact that we were magical people. So, I can believe what Harry says.”

“I didn’t mean I disbelieved him,” said Molly in a chastising tone. “It’s just that we all exaggerate occasionally.”

“But nobody exaggerated at the funeral, right?” put in Fred, hovering near the table, behind George. “You meant what you said.”

“Well, I didn’t,” said George casually. “Of course, I made that quite clear at the time.”

“Be quiet, you two,” said an irritated Molly. Harry grinned at Ron; it was nice to have Fred back. “Harry, maybe you should invite him over for dinner tomorrow night. It would be a good way to introduce him to the magical world.”

Harry’s eyebrows went up; he would never have thought of it. “Good one, Mum,” said George. “You can tell Harry thinks it’s a great idea.” Ron couldn’t help but chuckle.

“I was just surprised,” Harry said to George. “I don’t know how he’d react to it. No reason why not, though. Well, one thing.” He gestured to Fred and George. “You two can’t be here.”

“Harry!” protested Fred. “Didn’t anyone tell you that you should always speak well of the dead?”

“Fred, that’s the third time you’ve said that today,” said Molly.

“Yes, but it’s the first time he’s heard it.”

“Sorry, guys, I don’t mean any offense,” Harry said apologetically. “But Dudley is in a weird place mentally, and the last thing he needs is to worry about which body part is going to suddenly become huge.”

Ron exchanged a big grin with Fred and George. “Well, if he’s lucky—“ began Fred.

“Fred!” his mother exclaimed indignantly.

“Now, Fred,” said Arthur, “What did I always tell you two about situations like this?”

In unison, the twins replied, “It’s bad form to make a joke that’s so obvious everyone is already thinking it.”

“Exactly. I know, it’s hard to resist when it’s just sitting there, but you have to try.”

“Oh, Charlie,” said Ron, “I wanted to ask, did they ever find that dragon?”

“Not as far as I know,” he replied. “But the gossip in the dragoning community is that the goblins are trying to do this very quietly. Normally, we all know who’s doing what. But nobody’s saying anything about this, which means the goblins have strongly emphasized secrecy, which means that they almost certainly intend to tell no one if they get it back.”

Puzzled, Ron asked, “But how could they get it back in there with no one seeing? We’ll have to know when they get it back.”

Charlie shook his head. “It’s possible, but difficult, to move a dragon with a Portkey. It could be back there already, for all we know.”

“Some of us were talking about this at the Ministry today, at lunchtime,” said Arthur. “The goblins seem to be taking an extraordinarily hard line about this, harder than they really should. It’s like they’re spoiling for a fight. Bill, I know you’re not there anymore, but did you hear anything today?”

“Besides the slowdown? No, but it’s not surprising. I don’t plan to talk ask my former colleagues about that, because I don’t want to get them in trouble. As I said, I quit because I didn’t want to take Veritaserum, but I won’t be the only one asked to do so. I want them to be able to say that they haven’t told me anything.”

“That sounds awfully harsh, routinely questioning people under Veritaserum, for no reason,” noted Percy. “Why do they put up with it?”

“The goblins haven’t always been like this. It used to be that you did your job, did it well, they left you alone. They didn’t care who you said what to. They would only use Veritaserum in extreme cases, like if there was a big theft. They wanted it known that they would do it occasionally, just to keep people honest. But yeah, this is quite a change for them. If I had to guess, I’d say... Goblin politics are pretty complex, but the rumor was before that hard-liners had come into power recently. These are people, well, goblins, for whom it would be almost impossible to say, well, we lost a dragon, c’est la vie, it was in a good cause. Combining that with the goblins’ literal interpretations of the law and anti-human bias, this isn’t shocking to anyone who understands them reasonably well. Their myopia blinds them to the bad will they’re engendering among humans, particularly regarding how Harry is viewed. I think they took this hard line partly because Kingsley didn’t personally come to the negotiating table; they know the Minister has much bigger clout than anyone else, and no one else can deliver on an agreement. But Kingsley hasn’t come, and now they’re finding it hard to back down.”

“Word around the Ministry,” added Arthur, “is that in addition to having so many critical things to worry about, human public opinion is encouraging Kingsley not to hurry to negotiate with them. Their demands are viewed as extremely unreasonable, and in the case of Harry’s arrest, despicable. Right now, Kingsley would look very bad just sitting down with them, never mind making any concessions. I heard that he’s going to respond very aggressively to the slowdown; he more or less has to, or he’ll look weak to the humans who can’t get their gold out of Gringotts, and will be looking for someone to blame. Kingsley will make sure that it’s the goblins, rather than him.”

“Wow,” said Ron. “Harry, I told you we should have returned that dragon to Gringotts. Too bad we don’t have our own bank. Bill, why is there no wizards’ bank, I mean, run by wizards?”

“Well, the goblins are very good at banking, for one thing. Also, they’ve been doing it for so long—longer than any of us has been alive—that people think of them when they think of banking. I don’t know if anyone has even tried, but they couldn’t really compete against Gringotts.”

“If anyone were so inclined, now would certainly be an auspicious time for them to try,” said Arthur wryly.

Harry was suddenly curious. “If someone was going to start a bank, how much money would they need to do it?”

Bill raised his eyebrows at the question. “Hmmm... I suppose, at least a million Galleons, but it would depend on how much service they wanted to provide. Two would be better; it would make people feel more secure.”

“And if... I mean, let’s say someone had that kind of money, they wanted to start a bank, and they wanted you to run it. Would you do it?” Ron’s eyes went wide as he clearly realized that Harry wasn’t speaking hypothetically.

Bill chuckled. “Sure. Do you have two million Galleons?”

Harry stared at Bill, giving no response. Bill looked quizzical for a moment, then laughed. “Fred, George, I think you’re influencing Harry too much.”

Harry had never seen George look so surprised. “Um, Bill, I don’t think he’s joking. This is the kind of look he had when he gave us the gold for the shop.”

“Harry,” said Molly, mildly reproachfully, “I’ve been in your vault. I know you have a lot of money, but it isn’t close to two million.”

Still stunned, Ron said, "Yes, but you haven't been in the Black family vault, which Harry now controls. He has more than enough."

Bill and Fleur stared at each other, astonished, then back at Harry. "Are you serious?" asked Bill.

Harry shrugged. "What am I going to do with three million Galleons?"

"Is that a trick question?" asked Fred.

"Yeah, I mean," added George, "you hear it about as often as 'I wish all these sexy naked women would leave me alone.'"

"I don't know about the rest of you," said Percy, "but I quite like the idea. Give the goblins a little competition, and they might not be so arrogant."

"How would they react, Bill?" asked Charlie.

"I have no idea," said Bill. He looked at Harry intently. "You're really serious?"

Harry noticed that it was the second time Bill had asked the question, so he'd better answer it. "Yes, I'm serious. Why not? Maybe start out by giving loans to the people who won't be able to get their money out of Gringotts."

"Or," put in Ron excitedly, "give loans to the Muggle-borns who lost everything! They could really use it!"

"Oh, that's a great idea!" squealed Hermione, looking at Ron admiringly.

"Yeah, I think so too," agreed Harry.

Bill held up a hand. "Hey, before you three get too excited about this idea, I should remind you that a bank is a commercial enterprise, not a charity. You won't stay in business long if you look at it in terms of helping the deserving."

“Do you mean you can’t help the deserving and make money at the same time?” asked Harry.

Bill thought for a few seconds. “I mean that profit has to come first. Having said that, Ron’s idea isn’t bad. But we’d have to be careful, because some of them don’t have jobs. The loans would have to be for specific purposes, like getting or renting a place, that sort of thing, and they’d have to agree to repayment being taken directly from their wages. But it could work...” He trailed off, lost in thought.

Fleur smiled at Harry. “I think you have persuaded him. He may be a businessman, but I think he cannot resist the chance to do good.”

“Well, I can’t do too good, or else this bank wouldn’t last very long. Harry, one last time, are you—“

“Yes, I’m serious! Why do you think I asked about a bank? I think it’s a great idea! That money is just sitting in the Blacks’ vault, probably has been for centuries, God only knows how they got it, and it could be doing something useful. And Percy’s right, it wouldn’t be bad for the goblins to have a little competition. They might decide this slowdown isn’t such a good idea after all.”

“But, Bill,” said Charlie, “you’ve always said that the goblins are cutthroat competitors. Are they really going to stand by and do nothing while a rival bank opens?”

Bill didn’t appear worried. “They might be so arrogant that they’d think it wouldn’t be a threat. But the only way they could fight would be by providing better service, and if they do that, then fine. I don’t imagine that this bank could rival Gringotts in the next ten years; it could be a small thing, not much overhead, mainly to provide an alternative.

“Harry, how do you access the gold?” Harry told him; Bill looked unhappy. “Well, that’s not exactly ideal. It might, in the future, be necessary to access it several times a day, and I wouldn’t want to be bothering you all the time, or you might be away, or whatever.”

Harry gave a light shrug. “There’s an easy way around that.”

Ron made a sound between a chuckle and a snicker; Harry looked at him inquiringly. "I know what you're going to say," said Ron confidently. Harry gestured for him to go ahead and say it.

Ron looked down the table. "Before I do, can anyone else guess?" No one spoke. "Bill's going to become half-owner of Grimmauld Place," said Ron.

Harry pointed a finger at him. "Exactly."

"That doesn't work," said Bill. "We just bought this house, and I don't have nearly enough money to buy half of another."

Ron shook his head. "Bill, you're thinking the way normal people think, but this is Harry. He's not going to sell you half of Grimmauld Place, he's going to give it to you."

Eyebrows high, Bill looked at Harry, who nodded. "Why not? It solves the problem, and it would mainly be on paper; it's not like you two would live there."

There were a lot of surprised looks around the table. "You know, Harry," said Percy, "I say this with all respect and affection... you really are a slightly peculiar fellow."

This got laughter around the table, especially from Fred and George. "Thank you, Percy," said Harry dryly, but pleased that Percy had made another joke. "I appreciate it."

"See, Hermione and I have known this for quite a while," joked Ron. "Fred and George, they found out a few years ago."

"Or," suggested Fred, "maybe once you've walked to your death, Galleons don't seem all that important." Harry couldn't argue, though it was another subject that he preferred not to contemplate. Even so, he couldn't help but wonder exactly what did seem important. Except for his friendship with Ron and Hermione, nothing really came to mind.

Bill became more and more energized about the idea as the evening went on, mulling over various practical considerations and warning

Harry and Ron that this was not going to happen instantly, and that no one should start spreading the word. Forms would have to be made, a location chosen, a few staff hired, Concealment charms investigated, and so forth. A way would have to be found to persuade people that their money would be safe, even in the absence of magic-proof vaults.

After an hour's discussion in the living room, Bill came to a conclusion. "Harry, I can think of one good way to deal with the question of needing forms and equipment that can't be tampered with by magic. I'd like you to learn, and do, anti-tampering charms with the Elder Wand. If you did, we could be sure that there would be no way to change, forge, or otherwise commit fraud with those items by using magic."

"I don't know, Bill," he said uncomfortably. "I've already made a decision not to use it, and I don't want to start making exceptions. The only reason I still have it is that I haven't gotten around to getting rid of it yet."

"That reminds me, Harry," said Ron, "that I was going to tell you that your idea of where to leave it wasn't so great. I mean, everyone knows you have it, you talked about it with Voldemort before he died, you took it from him. It was in the Prophet, and criminals wouldn't mind trying to get it for themselves. If you put it back there, how long do you think it'll be before bad guys come after it? Even if you put lots of magical protection on it, it's difficult to put so much protection on something that it literally can't be gotten into."

"But nobody would know where it was," protested Harry.

"People would think of looking there, especially since because of your conversation, it's known that he was using it when he died. And when they couldn't get into it, they'd be sure it was there, and just try harder."

"He's right, Harry," put in Hermione. "I'd been thinking the same thing. It would be very hard to find a place where you could be 100% sure that it could never be found. There are possibilities: throw it into a

volcano, encase it with lead and send it to the bottom of the ocean, bury it in the snow of Antarctica, things like that—“

“Quite an imagination you have,” said an impressed Ron.

“Thank you. But it could always be found, and I don’t think it can be destroyed, and... I hate to say this, but there’s always the possibility of someone capturing and torturing you for the wand’s location. If you have and use the wand, that becomes a lot less likely. I understand why you don’t want to use it, but I really think the alternatives are worse.”

Annoyed, Harry sighed; he couldn’t see a flaw in their reasoning. “So, you’re saying that I should have just dueled with Voldemort and kept my mouth shut.”

Hermione’s tone was apologetic. “We understand why you did it. I’m sure it was satisfying to talk to him like that, tell him you knew what he did wrong, what he missed. But, yes, it would have saved you a lot more trouble later on.”

Harry was silent, thinking, and cursing himself for having talked about it publicly, not thinking of the consequences. It seemed obvious in retrospect: the Elder Wand was now an albatross around his neck. “All right,” he conceded. “I’ll do the spells. But I’m still getting rid of the thing if some good opportunity comes along.” Things sure don’t go the way you planned them, he thought.

* * * * *

The next morning while he ate breakfast, Harry explained to Kreacher their plans for a bank, choosing his words carefully. He didn’t want Kreacher to think that they were going to do anything his former masters would have disapproved of; he greatly preferred Kreacher’s willing help to his unwilling help. He decided to frame it as an action taken in opposition to the goblins, and emphasized that the bank would be a profit-making enterprise. He said nothing about the notion of using loans to help Muggle-born wizards. Kreacher was very pleased with the idea, so Harry decided to add the information that

Bill would become a co-owner of the house, and explained the reason. Kreacher was less enthused with this, but didn't protest.

Looking at the Prophet, he reflected, seemed more like a responsibility, something he should do to stay informed, and he was eating breakfast anyway, so why not. The main story was the news that a way had been found to protect Diagon Alley from dementors. It would be set up in the morning, and Diagon Alley would be open to the public at noon. People were cautioned that to be on the safe side, for the first day, they shouldn't come unless they could do the Patronus Charm, or were with someone who could.

Another major story was about the Gringotts slowdown, and Kingsley's reaction to it, which was even harsher than Harry expected. "This action on the part of the Gringotts goblins is totally unacceptable, and the goblins' statements that the slowdown is due to high demand is ludicrous on its face. Special escorts have been offered to citizens recently due to the dementor threat, but the number of customers visiting Gringotts was less than half of what is usual. This action is clearly what it appears to be: a threat to the economic well-being of all wizards intended to coerce our submission to their demand to have Harry Potter arrested and to pay them restitution for his actions which saved the wizarding community. Their actions are tantamount to holding our gold hostage, demanding that their financial health be attended to sooner than the deep wounds inflicted on the members of the wizarding community. They have also breached the public's trust by denying people the ability to withdraw the money that is rightfully theirs. If the goblins do not reverse this action, they will have committed the equivalent of theft. I insist that they begin serving their customers again as usual, or turn over Gringotts to those who will do so."

Wow, thought Harry, he really went off on them. Thinking about it and reading it again, however, he could see nothing specific that he didn't agree with. It was more that the tone was so aggressive, not polite and moderate as politicians often were. The article went on to note more or less the same thing, but also noted the strong approval from citizens to whom the quote was read.

Looking at the bottom of page one, he saw a box containing, in large type, the words "Should Potter Apologize?" and "see editorial, page 18" in small letters below it. Intrigued, he automatically turned to the right page. The editorial was titled "Potter Should Apologize." It was not the main editorial, but one written by someone who was not a regular Prophet writer. He read:

The title of this editorial is not a mistake: Harry Potter should apologize to the goblins for his actions of the day before the defeat of You-Know-Who.

I know very well what reactions this view will get, as it already has from those to whom I've expressed it in person: scorn, derision, disbelief, even hostility. He saved our society, they say, he was willing to sacrifice himself for our freedom. He performed heroically, and I should be taking up editorial space praising him rather than criticizing him. Without his actions, the Prophet would still be a mouthpiece for You-Know-Who, and I would not enjoy the privilege of freely expressing my opinion, in the Prophet or anywhere else.

All this is true, and if I met Mr. Potter, I would express my profound respect and admiration for him and his actions. I would then urge him to apologize to the goblins for those actions.

I come at this question from a point of view uncommon in the wizarding community: I have had extensive dealings with goblins, and have spent much time with them. I know them almost as well as any human does. Their demands, which seem ridiculous and insulting to us, make perfect sense for them, though they are a shade more aggressive than usual.

One must always keep in mind the historical background of this situation. Relations between humans and goblins have always been thorny, and it is true that goblins have not always behaved perfectly. But humans have always had greater numbers, greater power, and the ability to inflict their will on the goblins. Even a summary of the important events of this history would consume more space than the Prophet has already generously allowed me; let us just say that goblins have suffered greatly, and repeatedly, at the hands of humans.

This matters because it has greatly informed the current mindset of the goblins. They religiously look out for their own interests, because they know that humans cannot be trusted to do so. Their pride is important to them, because they know that humans have always disrespected them, looked down on them, mocked them. Their pride is reflected in Gringotts, an ancient and respected establishment, in which they perform a valuable service for our community, and do it well. Should it then surprise us that they would react with anger at an audacious and successful break-in by three teenagers, who managed to escape? Was it truly necessary? Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, and Mr. Weasley have provided only the vaguest details regarding the necessity of the break-in. Do we doubt them? Of course not. The results were obvious; You-Know-Who was dead within a day. But to the goblins, the story should have been told: not for the sake of the detailed content, which the goblins would have found irrelevant, but for the respect that such an explanation would have shown. If someone broke into and damaged your house, you would feel that you were owed at least a polite explanation, no matter for how good a reason it was done.

Mr. Potter's flippant remarks at the Merlin ceremony, while understandable—he is, after all, still only 17—were decidedly unhelpful. He is of course no diplomat; he should have ignored the question from the audience. But what is not understandable has been the reaction from the Ministry, which should know better. Minister Shacklebolt's refusal to meet with Gringotts leaders to discuss the issue was seen as a sign of great disrespect, which he had to have known, as he has advisers to tell him such things. He may have felt, as most wizards do, that in view of what happened to our community, that the goblins should wait. But he is new to politics and government, and seems not to realize that things must sometimes be done in the interests of all, even if they seem distasteful and unreasonable.

In view of the Minister's most recent comments, which will serve only to greatly exacerbate the situation, we cannot reasonably hope for responsible action to come from the Ministry. Only Harry Potter can salvage this situation now. If he were to apologize to the goblins, it would go a long way towards defusing the situation. Why should he apologize, one may ask, when he has arguably done nothing wrong?

In diplomacy, sometimes apologies are offered where no fault exists, to patch up disputes or soothe wounded national pride. Grown-ups understand this, and act accordingly; those who insist they are acting on 'principle' more often than not harm their own interests in their naiveté. Mr. Potter's naiveté is understandable; Minister Shacklebolt's is not.

As it stands now, the situation will continue to escalate to the point where both sides may end up fervently wishing that conflict had been avoided. As the party with the upper hand, it is incumbent on humans to take the initiative in repairing what damage has been done. Let us hope that Minister Shacklebolt or Mr. Potter will see this, and do the right thing. My money is on Mr. Potter.

Harry then read the companion editorial, which ridiculed the idea of apologizing, strongly backing Harry's actions and Kingsley's decisions. Harry put down the paper and leaned back in his chair, at one point so far that he almost fell over backwards. Chagrined, hoping for some reason that Kreacher hadn't seen it, he got up and headed for the living room, where he lay on the sofa and thought. He knew that he would under no circumstances apologize, but he wasn't sure exactly why. Even if he could help defuse the situation, it seemed extremely wrong to do so. Finally, an answer came to him. Inspired, he Summoned the Prophet from the kitchen table, found that the writer's name was Pietr Kassant, and sat at the desk at which he read his mail.

Dear Mr. Kassant,

A good friend recently said to me that if you lie to someone, it means you don't respect them. I respect anyone—human, house-elf, or goblin—until they give me a reason not to. I'm not sorry about anything I did. I don't respect the goblins' recent actions, so maybe I should go ahead and lie to them. But I think if I was the kind of person who could do that, I wouldn't have been the kind of person who did what I did. I can't speak for Kingsley, but he and I both fought Voldemort when a lot of people didn't, so maybe we're just the kind of people who do what we think is right, and apologizing when we're not sorry isn't right. Maybe that's naïve, I don't know. But I think it's better than lying.

As for you, I don't agree with what you wrote, but I respect it—except for when you said 'You-Know-Who.' Can we just say his name already?? Are you afraid of a dead man? He's really, 100% dead, the kind you don't come back from. I promise that if you say 'Voldemort,' nothing bad will happen to you.

Sorry. But this just annoys the hell out of me.

Sincerely,

Harry Potter

Satisfied, Harry folded it, put it in an envelope, and put it where he knew Kreacher would pick it up and have it delivered. He turned his attention to the mail pile; looking at it reminded him that he'd have to talk to Narcissa Malfoy again in a half an hour. He didn't want to be late, and give her an excuse to be rude and insulting. He fully intended to put away the mirror and send it back at the first sign of an insult. I've taken enough crap from that family, he thought.

The fan mail kept coming; today, some of it was regarding the Gringotts situation, reaffirming their support for his actions and condemning the goblins; some asked him to speak publicly against the goblins. Yeah, that'd be helpful, Harry thought sardonically.

The fireplace lit up, and Hermione stepped out and walked toward him. He stood, wondering what was going on, as she would normally be at the Ministry helping Arthur. She was holding a magazine and a piece of paper. Oh, no, he thought, the Witch Weekly article. But she didn't look unhappy, or at least, any more unhappy than she'd been since she found out about her parents. Without a word, she handed him the paper. He read:

Dear Miss Granger,

After reconsideration inspired mostly by a conversation with your friend Mr. Potter, I have decided not to publish the article. I understand that this situation has been a tragedy for you, and

especially in view of your heroic efforts on behalf of all of us, I have no wish to compound your distress by making it public.

I would warn you, however, that if I found this out, others could as well. Of course, if they did, your parents would likely not talk to them, rendering the story more or less useless. I would also warn you that journalists do not usually do things like this. As you are now, like it or not, a public person, you and the others would be well advised to consider how anything you do would appear if it were made public.

My admiration and thanks to you and your friends for your actions, and best of luck in your future.

Dormus Pinter

Harry looked back up at Hermione with raised eyebrows; it was the last thing he'd expected. "Thank you," she said simply, her eyes full of warmth and affection. She reached out and hugged him, holding on harder than she usually did.

"I really had no idea he'd do that," he said, though happy she was so grateful. "It doesn't change what happened, though."

"Yes, but at least I don't have to suffer in public," she said, letting go. "I really appreciate it."

"What are you doing? Oh, correspondence. You could probably spend all day on that."

"I sure hope not. I'm doing it now partly because I'm supposed to talk to Narcissa Malfoy. Yeah, I think so too," he added, in response to her disdainful look.

"Well," she sighed, "she did save your life, so I guess we have to be a little grateful, whatever her reasons. It's strange the way things happen sometimes. What are you going to tell her?"

Harry looked around the mail area. "First, let me make sure Slughorn—ah, there it is." He picked up a small box and told her what

he intended to do as he opened it. Her mouth fell open. "She'll never agree to that!"

He shrugged. "If she doesn't, then she doesn't get my help. It's as simple as that."

She grinned a little. "I think I'll stay around for a few minutes. I'm interested to see this. Oh, read the letter."

He put aside the bottle and read. "Harry—Good to hear from you. I am very surprised at what you intend to do, but I understand your reasons. You know that this substance is controlled, and for good reason; it can easily be abused. Only for you would I do this. We enjoyed watching the ceremony, and the three you mentioned have been quite popular since then. Young students ask about you; I tell them that you are what you seem to be. I hope to hear from you again. Yours, Horace." After a pause, he added, "Well, at least he sent it."

"You know how he is. Considering your status right now, he'd probably do anything you asked him to do that didn't involve a long Azkaban sentence if he got caught."

They chatted until 10:00, when Harry got out his mirror. "Narcissa, are you there?"

After a small pause, she answered, her voice frosty but controlled. "I am here."

"Is Draco there?"

She glared at him. "No, he is not. I did not wish him to be taken into custody. You have acted in bad faith."

His eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Your friends, Weasley and the M—" she cut herself off as Harry gave her a warning look. "The Granger girl gave evidence against Draco yesterday in the Wizengamot. I refuse to believe they do not know what we are discussing."

“First of all, I don’t own them,” he responded, irritated. “Secondly, they didn’t say anything that wasn’t true. They, and I, are not going to lie for Draco, or you. If I intervene for Draco, for example, I won’t say ‘he didn’t do anything.’ I’ll say, ‘he did this and that, but he realizes it was a mistake, and he plans to be a good citizen in the future.’ Something like that.”

She nodded briskly. “You said there were conditions.”

“Anyone who I help like that has to answer questions from me under Veritaserum.” Her eyes went wide. “The questions would have to do with the person’s degree of responsibility, what they did in the past and why they did it, what their future plans are, that sort of thing. I don’t plan to vouch for someone and then watch them kill, or join another powerful Dark wizard. No questions about anything like romance, or other matters that aren’t related to my main interest would be asked, nothing designed to humiliate the person.”

“The whole procedure in itself would be humiliating,” she sneered. “Absolutely not. It is unacceptable.”

He shrugged. “Then we’re done.” He started to put the mirror away, but stopped as he heard her alarmed voice. “Wait.” He held it in front of his face again. “We can offer you gold instead.”

He shook his head. “I don’t want gold. Is it really so difficult to understand why I want this? I’m not trying to humiliate you, but if I help you or Draco avoid prison, and something you do results in someone’s death, even indirectly, then I’m responsible for that. I need to be assured that that won’t happen. You and Draco allied yourselves with a wizard who was responsible for hundreds of deaths, including those of my parents. I’m sorry, but I don’t plan to just take your word for it that you’ll never do it again.”

There was fury in her voice, but she kept it level. “You owe me a debt.”

“As I said,” he answered, trying to remain calm himself, “we disagree on just how that works. For example, if you said under Veritaserum

that you would have saved me no matter what answer I gave about Draco being in the castle, I would feel more indebted. But I don't think that's going to happen," he added, noting her expression. "Also, remember, I saved Draco, too, earlier. We could argue that you were just paying me back for what I already did for him, even if you didn't know it. Anyway, these are my terms. Take it or leave it."

After a slight pause, she replied, "You will receive an owl." The connection ceased, and he was looking at himself in the mirror. He put it away. "Charming woman," he muttered to Hermione.

"Well, I think your terms are very reasonable," said Hermione. "Of course, not being evil, I would think that." He smiled. "Do you think she or Draco will do it?"

"I really don't care," he said. "I guess she wants to let Draco make up his own mind. She has her pride, and she may not have done that much personally, so she may say no. Draco may not have directly killed, but he's done enough that if I was him, I'd worry."

"In a way, she's right about one thing. It would be humiliating for them, to be questioned by you, under Veritaserum."

"Not my problem."

"Oh, I agree, of course. It's just that if they say no, that'll probably be the reason." She stood. "I should be getting back, but... thank you again for what you did. It means so much to me that you'd protect me like that."

He nodded. "You've protected me a fair bit recently."

"This is different. This is... more important, somehow. See you later."

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 6, Diagon Alley: In his first public outing since defeating Voldemort, Harry finds himself the center of attention. Though most of the attention is very positive, he finds that he still

can't enjoy it, or meet the very high expectations of some he encounters.

From Chapter 6: "He's your cousin," said Molly, again with disappointment in his attitude. "You grew up with him. I thought you'd want him to stay with you."

"You were wrong," said Harry, more emotionally than he meant to. "I need my space right now, I'm not ready to have someone move in with me. And I may have grown up with him, but his mother raised him to treat me like dirt, approved while he chased me, insulted me, you name it. That's not the reason I don't want him staying with me. I do feel bad for him. But you shouldn't make assumptions about situations you don't know about."

Chapter 6

Diagon Alley

Soon after Hermione left, Harry decided to go for another fly. He flew for a little over a half hour, and encountered no dementors. He thought about taking a quick swing over Hogsmeade, but he was fairly sure that by now nobody would be outside. Also, he didn't want to be seen, and have it get back to Ron and Hermione, or anyone; he didn't want to hear a lecture on irresponsibility or safety.

Bill came by and talked to Harry about the structure of the bank they would create, and to Harry's exasperation, asked one more time if he was sure. Bill explained that he intended to hire three or four people at first, and no more until necessary and the business merited it. He continued talking about his plans; Harry nodded occasionally, but said nothing.

Finally, Bill frowned. "Harry, is something wrong?"

Surprised, Harry shook his head. "No, why?"

"You're not saying much."

"I... I don't have anything to say. I don't know anything about this. As far as I'm concerned, anything you want to do is okay."

"You really have no opinion about any of it?"

Harry thought for a moment. "About the business stuff, no. Only about what's the general direction of the place. You say it has to make money, and I don't mind, but I really want it to help people who need help. So, I guess you should consult me about things like the direction of the business, whether any policy will make things harder or easier for the people I want to help. But details, profits, financial things, that's your thing. I wouldn't know enough to say anything one way or the other."

“So, for example,” Bill said, “suppose we give people loans, and they go out and blow it all gambling. What’s to stop people from doing that?”

“Nothing, I suppose.”

“Well, that’s part of the reason banks typically don’t give loans to poor people. Sometimes people are just poor because they’re poor, but sometimes it’s because of bad money management. Some people are just no good at dealing with money, it slips through their fingers. They can’t control their impulses. You give them a hundred Galleons and a week later it’s gone, with nothing real to show for it—“

Harry found himself becoming irritated. “Are you saying we shouldn’t make loans?”

Bill was clearly trying to be patient. “No, but I think you have this idea that we make loans, people will use the money wisely as a resource to rebuild their lives, and get back on their feet. Now, some will, but some won’t. Since you don’t have experience with this, you may not know this, and if we make a lot of loans to people who wouldn’t normally get them, this will probably happen in quite a number of cases. You might then wonder, what went wrong? Why didn’t it work? I’m telling you this so you know in advance. If we loan money with no strings attached, a fair amount of it will be wasted. Worse, they’ll come back and ask for more loans. They’ll plead, tell stories about what happened to the money, say they’ll do better next time. And if you give them another, the same thing will happen to a lot of them, and they’ll end up in debt.”

Harry sighed; this was more complicated than he had thought. “Well, what do you suggest?”

“Depending on the person, I’d suggest we interview them, find out what their needs are, and provide for those needs directly, rather than simply hand over gold. If they need a house, we buy the house directly, and set up a schedule of payments. Most importantly, we make sure that they authorize us to get the money for repayment directly from their employer. That’s a must.”

“Why? I’m pretty sure it doesn’t work that way in the Muggle world.”

“No, it doesn’t,” agreed Bill. “But—I studied this in Muggle Studies, and more on my own—Muggles have something called a credit rating, and if they don’t pay back loans, they can’t get loans in the future, and it affects them in a lot of ways that it doesn’t affect us. Even then, many of them default on loans. Loans aren’t common in the wizarding world. Goblins make them, but only the kind where you have to fear for your health if you don’t pay them back. Since we won’t be doing that, we have to take other measures to make sure we don’t lose the money we lend out. More importantly, if we aren’t seen to be running a sound operation, if we look like we don’t care that we’re losing money hand over fist, our reputation in the financial community will be bad, and it’ll affect the overall business badly. I could explain why in more detail, but I sense that I’ve already passed the point where you stopped being interested.”

His manner mildly apologetic, Harry said, “It’s more that what you say is kind of depressing; I didn’t know all this. Do you think it’s still worth doing?”

“Oh, absolutely,” said Bill firmly. “It would be useful if the only thing it did was keep the goblins on their toes. But even if it can’t do everything you hoped and imagined it would, it’ll still do a lot of good. Loans at a reasonable interest rate are almost nonexistent in the wizarding world, so it would be good to introduce the concept. They aren’t very profitable, but since you don’t care about that, it helps. But, sure, it’ll be worthwhile, don’t worry about that. Oh, and this bank will need a name. Had you thought of that?” Harry shook his head. “Well, I’ll think about it a bit more. Anyway, sorry to depress you.”

Harry wasn’t sure whether Bill was teasing him or chiding him. “Well, as long as it can do something. I guess I just have to get used to the idea that money can’t make people’s lives better all by itself.” They talked for a while more, after which Bill left. Harry hoped that his input wouldn’t be needed often.

* * * * *

At three in the afternoon, Harry put on his Invisibility Cloak and Apparated to the football field, far enough from where Dudley had been sitting the day before that he wouldn't hear the sound of the Apparition. He walked toward Dudley, taking it off while Dudley wasn't looking in his direction. "Dudley," he called out when he was fifteen yards away.

Dudley looked over in surprise. "Wow," he said when Harry reached him. "Didn't see you coming." Harry got the impression that Dudley had been conscientiously looking.

"How're you doing?"

Dudley shrugged. "As usual. So, what'd you find out?"

"It turns out I was right, the Ministry does have a department that handles this kind of thing. It's a little rare, but definitely not unheard of. Also, there's a couple of schools you can go to that are like my school, except for adults who found out that they're wizards. One's in France, and the other's in America."

"Why isn't there one in England?"

"Not enough people need it. It's kind of like, there's one for each half of the world, and that's enough."

Dudley nodded. "Well, I'd probably go to the American one, but I'd have lots of time to think about it." There was a short silence, then Dudley asked, "Did you talk to Mum and Dad?"

Harry's face showed his annoyance. "Yeah. It was big fun."

Dudley grinned a little. "I'll bet. What did they say?"

"Well, your mother's still in denial. 'Dudley is not a wizard!'" Harry lightly mimicked Petunia's tone. "I pulled out the letter from Hogwarts. Your mother reacted as if someone had pulled her pants down in public." More somberly, Harry added, "Your father didn't know."

"She didn't tell him?" asked an astonished Dudley. "Even after... what happened?" Harry could see that Dudley preferred not to mention the incident with the Death Eater if he could help it, and he didn't blame Dudley.

"Well, you know how she is. For her, wizards are like the devil. Probably she was really ashamed of it, since she knew it came from her side of the family. She didn't want to admit it to Vernon; she just hoped it would go away. Even with me, you remember how they tried to escape the letters. It's just that with me, Dumbledore wouldn't take no for an answer."

"Why you, and not me?"

"Because I'm Harry Potter." To Dudley's blank look, he added, "Oh, yeah, I forget that doesn't mean the same thing to you." He launched into an explanation of his early fame in the wizarding world, and the reasons for it. "So, he knew the Dark wizards would be coming for me, and that not training me as a wizard would mean I'd die, sooner rather than later. So, he insisted. In your case, he knew that it wouldn't be good for you not to go—that's probably why he said what he said when he came to pick me up two years ago—but he knew how your mother felt. I think he thought that however bad a decision it was, she was your mother, so she got to make the decision. With me, she didn't even think of me as a son, so that was different."

"I wondered... I mean, especially since this thing happened, but... why is she like that? Why is it so bad for her?"

Harry didn't want to gossip, but at this point, he felt Dudley deserved to know. Harry told him the story of what he'd seen in Snape's last memories. "So, if there's more to it than that, I don't know what it is. It seems like... she just decided she hated wizards after that. Now, she has to decide whether she hates wizards more than she loves her Duddykins."

Harry had said it in a matter-of-fact tone, with sympathy for Dudley, but Dudley looked at him crossly. "Don't say that," he snapped.

“I didn’t mean any offense,” Harry protested. “I just said that because that’s the way she always—“

“I know. Just don’t, okay?”

Harry nodded. “Sorry.” Mollified, Dudley grunted an acknowledgment. Guess it’s a sensitive topic for him, thought Harry.

They talked for a half hour about general topics relating to the wizarding world. “I’d like to see it,” Dudley said. “Is there some kind of town square, or downtown area for wizards? That would be really interesting.”

Oh, boy, thought Harry. “Yes, there is. It’s called Diagon Alley.”

“Could we go there? I mean, now?”

Harry had hoped to avoid that for a while, but he felt as though he should do what Dudley wanted, within reason, and he could definitely understand Dudley’s curiosity. “Yeah, we can.” He explained Apparition; Dudley seemed nervous, but nodded. Harry wrapped his right arm around Dudley’s left, and Apparated them to Diagon Alley.

Harry was well used to the sensation, but upon arriving, he had to support Dudley, who was very off-balance. Dudley gestured that he was all right, and Harry let go. Amazed, Dudley looked around. Harry remembered how he’d felt the first time he was in Diagon Alley; it had seemed like a whole different world. The next thing Harry noticed was that they were being stared at by a half dozen people. Suddenly uncomfortable, Harry nudged Dudley. “Let’s walk, okay?”

“Hmmm?” Dudley asked, his attention elsewhere. “Oh, okay.” They walked slowly, Dudley still looking around with an awed expression. They had gotten no more than ten yards when a middle-aged couple walked up to them.

“Harry Potter,” said the man proudly. He was slim, with brown hair that was just beginning to recede; his wife was a little plump but attractive, also with brown hair. “Should have known you’d be here

today. Got to show the flag, set an example. I'm Arnold Grant, and this is my wife Anna. It's an honor to meet you."

"Thank you," said Harry politely. "This is my cousin, Dudley."

Having just finished shaking Harry's hand, Grant reached for that of the befuddled Dudley. "A pleasure. You must be so proud, to be his cousin." Harry couldn't help but smile at the absurdity of the thought. "I'm sorry, I don't want to disturb you and your cousin, but I had to say thank you for everything you've done. Several of my friends suffered greatly recently, and two were let out of Azkaban because of your victory. I'm sure they would want to thank you as well."

Harry nodded, not knowing what to say. "Well, we do what we have to do."

Grant smiled. "So modest, just as the Prophet said. It's good to have them back in business too, and again, it's thanks to you. Good luck to you." With a small bow, Grant and his wife moved on; Harry continued walking, a gaping Dudley a step behind. "What was that all about?"

Embarrassed, Harry shrugged. "I did mention that thing about that Voldemort wizard."

"Yeah, but—"

"Harry!" Coming at him from the side was a pretty young woman who he vaguely recognized. Obviously understanding from his expression that he didn't recognize her, she said, "I'm Penelope—"

"Clearwater," he finished.

"Oh, you do remember! Thank you. I'm in a hurry, but I saw you, and I had to stop and say thank you. What you did was so brave." She looked at him admiringly, then quickly leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. "Got to go, bye!" She walked off briskly, taking long strides.

Dudley was still gaping. "Who was that?"

"I barely knew her, she went to Hogwarts, but was four years older than me."

"And she kissed you? Is that some kind of custom in this world?"

"Uh, no," said Harry. "This is kind of a special situation." Dudley said nothing, clearly not knowing what to say. As they passed Quality Quidditch Supplies, Harry motioned to some brooms, and started to explain Quidditch. He didn't go into too much detail, however, as he knew Dudley wouldn't remember much.

"Potter!" he heard a man shout from behind. "I thought that was you looking in the window!" He walked up and shook Harry's hand. "I'm Wally Whyton, manager of the Wimbourne Wasps." Harry couldn't help but raise his eyebrows. "Yes, I know. I always joke that that was the reason I chose the Wasps, because of the alliteration. I won't hold you up, but I wanted to give you my card. We'd love for you to try out, as soon as the Quidditch World Cup ends. Everyone in the Quidditch world knows that you're a great Seeker, it would be a real coup for the team to have you."

"Well, thank you," said Harry, accepting the card, which was twice as big as a normal Muggle business card. "I really don't know what I'm going to do, though. I feel like I need to relax for a while."

Whyton nodded. "Well, like the Minister said, you deserve it. Just keep us in mind when you think about your future, will you? Even after the season starts, you're very welcome to try out." He nodded to Harry and Dudley, and went back into the shop.

Harry sighed. "As I was saying—"

"Is this going to keep happening?" asked Dudley.

"It might," allowed Harry. "We don't have to stay, we can go if you want." Harry found himself hoping Dudley would agree.

"No, I'm okay. This is very strange, though."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Tell me about it."

"Does this happen every time you go out in public?"

"I don't go out in public that much. This is the first time since I beat Voldemort."

"Why?"

Harry looked at him as though it were obvious. "Because of all this."

"I wouldn't mind it."

"Well, sure, it seems good," acknowledged Harry. "It's just a bit much."

They made it another fifteen yards before the next interruption. An old man walked up to Harry, warmth in his eyes. "Hello, Mr. Potter. A great pleasure to see you again, looking like yourself this time."

Harry smiled. "Elphias, please call me Harry. This is my cousin, Dudley. He's visiting Diagon Alley for the first time."

"Very pleased to meet you," he said kindly, shaking Dudley's hand. "A very pleasant place, made safe once more by your cousin. Harry, please convey to the Weasleys my condolences over Muriel's death. She could be... a challenge, but no one deserves to go like that."

"I will, sir," agreed Harry.

"And, congratulations on your accomplishment. You said at the ceremony that Albus laid it out for you, and that you followed his plan. I'm so very glad that you did not let what Muriel, or that snake Skeeter, said sway you. You believed in him, you trusted him."

If you only knew, thought Harry. Maybe Dumbledore was more complex than I thought, but you'll be happier keeping that pure image you have. Ignorance is bliss. "And everything worked out pretty much as he thought it would." Except for my being alive, that is.

"I would have thought nothing else. I understand you are keeping it to yourself for now, but one day, I would be very happy to hear the story of his last days—the real story. I hope you will indulge me sometime."

Harry nodded. "It was very nice to see you again, Elphias."

"You too, Harry. Please have a nice afternoon."

They walked on, Dudley seeming to get used to the interruptions. "Now, him, you knew, right?"

Harry nodded. "He was an old friend of the headmaster of Hogwarts—oh, wait, you saw him that time. He's dead now." He went on to explain a little more about Dumbledore. "He was very respected in wizarding society—"

"And we miss him very much in the Wizengamot," another voice cut in. It was a tall woman, almost as tall as Harry, in her late fifties, with equal parts black and white hair. "Harry, my name is Marilyn Bennefort. You wouldn't remember me, but you were before me three years ago, when you were up on charges of using underage magic. I voted to acquit." Her tone and eyes suggested that she hoped he wouldn't judge them all based on the actions of Fudge and a few others.

"Thank you," said Harry. "This is my cousin, Dudley."

"Ah, yes, the young man whose life Harry saved," she said, looking Dudley over; Dudley's eyebrows went high and he looked at Harry. "I got in a little trouble for that," he explained.

"Nothing that was deserved, of course; it was all political. Many of us are hoping that this will happen less now, with a less political Minister in the office. Harry, might I have a word with you?"

Harry paused. "Okay, but Dudley has to come, too. I'm not leaving him alone."

She nodded. "A prudent precaution, of course. You are of age now, but we still want no repeats if we can help it." Dudley, though

obviously not knowing what they were referring to, looked slightly alarmed as they walked to a more secluded spot in between two shops.

“Harry, this has been discussed among those of us in the Wizengamot. We were going to send you an owl, but since I have you here... we would like to extend to you an invitation to join our number, to be a member of the Wizengamot.”

Now, Harry was as stunned as Dudley had been earlier. “Wait. The Wizengamot is the wizarding court, right? The highest one, or maybe, the only one?”

“There are a few lower ones, but yes, it is the main one. Any case of any importance comes before us.”

“And you want me to be on it.” She nodded. “But I’m not a lawyer!” he exclaimed, his surprise coming through in his tone. “I don’t know the first thing about what you do!”

She nodded understandingly. “I can understand why this would surprise you, but that is not important. You would learn. How to explain... let me ask you, Harry. You spent a year hunting for a way to ensure Voldemort’s demise. It has been said that you faced Voldemort, fully expecting to die, in the hope that it would lead to his defeat. Why did you do that?”

He could think of only one answer. “Because it was the right thing to do.”

She nodded vigorously. “Exactly. That, Harry, is what we want. It is easy to find someone with legal knowledge, even with wisdom. But someone who would do what you did is very rare indeed; Albus was such a person.” Harry nodded. “As you saw three years ago, there is a faction on the Wizengamot that will do what is right politically, rather than what is simply right. Your actions show that you can be trusted to make a fair decision, based on nothing more than facts and evidence. That is the reason we would like you to join.”

“Wow,” said Harry, still stunned. “I... I don’t know what to say.”

“Feel free to take as much time as you like to think it over, of course. I should point out that it is hardly a full-time commitment. It is up to the individual as to how many trials or hearings to attend; you could attend very rarely if you chose. My point is that if you accept, you are not taking an enormous burden upon yourself; it would be at your discretion. You may want to discuss this with Minister Shacklebolt, or Mr. Weasley.”

“I will. And thank you for—” he paused. “Just a minute... while you’re here, there’s something I’d like to ask. It has to do with a wizard’s debt.” He explained to a surprised Bennefort the basic details of what Narcissa Malfoy had done, and her reasons. “So, do you think I owe her a debt?”

She looked at him with curiosity. “Are you asking me because I’m on the Wizengamot?”

“Maybe partly, but mainly, because you’re someone not connected with the situation. Ron, Hermione, the others... they all have experience with the Malfoys, and it may affect what they say.”

“Do you think I haven’t had any dealings with the Malfoys?” she asked, with mild amusement at Harry’s naiveté. “If you want the opinion of someone connected to politics but doesn’t know the Malfoys, you’ll have to go overseas. But I understand what you mean.”

She thought for a few seconds. “Honestly, I believe it is what you decide it is. I think there is little moral obligation, and certainly no obligation to do anything that you don’t feel is right. I can see you dislike the idea of being in her debt, and I don’t blame you. If I were you, I would consider that I owed her some kind of debt, but one in which repayment must be consistent with your personal ethics.”

Harry gave her a wry smile. “That’s pretty much what I think, but Narcissa seems to think it’s too great a restriction on what she wants me to do.”

Bennefort laughed. "I'll bet. By the way, in connection with that... it's not public yet, as it's just been decided, but I'll tell you that the Wizengamot has issued a summons for Draco Malfoy. Narcissa's testimony will eventually be requested, but no charges against her are contemplated. But for Draco, it may well come to that. In addition to any assistance he may have provided his father, he is suspected of two counts of attempted murder against Professor Dumbledore, and allowing Death Eaters into Hogwarts. Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger tell us that you already knew that, however."

"I did," he said. "But thanks for telling me about that."

"Not at all. Well, I'll leave you to your walk. I hope I was able to help."

"You did, thank you," said Harry.

She nodded. "You'll get an owl with the formal offer. Take your time."

As she walked off, Harry shook his head. The Wizengamot? Him? It seemed inconceivable. He could understand her point, but... it seemed like something that should be happening to someone else, not him.

They walked past Ollivander's; Harry explained how wands were made, and told about his first trip there. The shop was closed, and Harry wondered how long it would be until Mr. Ollivander returned.

Though he was aware of many stares, the next five minutes went by without an interruption, and he was able to describe many points of interest to Dudley. Near the fireplace he was approached four times in quick succession, and moved away, to Flourish and Blotts. After looking there for a few minutes, they turned a corner, and Harry saw two very familiar faces. "Neville! Ginny!" he exclaimed.

"Harry! Great to see you here," said Neville cheerfully.

"I'm surprised," added Ginny, "I'd have thought you'd be hiding out at Grimmauld Place." Harry thought there was an undercurrent of disapproval in her voice, or maybe it was just that he hadn't seen her when she thought he should. He liked girls, and Ginny especially, but

was sometimes frustrated that he couldn't understand what they were thinking, or how to deal with them. No wonder Ron bought that book, he thought.

"I would be," he admitted, "but Dudley wanted to see the wizarding world. It turns out he's a wizard, but nobody knew. He got the Hogwarts letter, but his mother never told anyone." A glance at Dudley told Harry that Dudley was not sure he wanted anyone to know even that much about him.

"Wow, I didn't know that ever happened," said Neville, who offered his hand to Dudley. "Welcome to the wizarding world, Dudley. It must all be very strange, very surprising." Dudley nodded, but said nothing.

"What are you two doing here?" asked Harry. "Shouldn't you be—"

"At Hogwarts, yes," said Neville. "But Professor McGonagall, just for today, asked that anyone who can do a Patronus—"

It dawned on Harry. "You're on patrol."

"Yes, exactly. Just in case. Four people an hour, until nine o'clock. Helps take the burden off the Aurors a bit. Which reminds me, unfortunately, we need to go, we're supposed to be moving all the time. But it's good to see you here."

"You, too," he said, looking at both of them. They said goodbye and moved on. "Friends from Hogwarts," Harry explained.

"What happened to him?"

Harry recalled that while Neville's face looked much better than it had at the Hogwarts battle, there were still scars. "There was kind of a hard time recently. Because of the Voldemort wizard." Dudley asked some questions about Voldemort, which Harry answered as best he could. To Dudley's final question, 'how did you beat him?', Harry could only say that it was a long story.

"What's that?" asked Dudley, pointing to the shop across the street.

"It's a joke shop for wizards," answered Harry carefully.

"Sounds cool! Can we check it out?"

"Mmmm... maybe we should wait. The guys that run it are popular, and huge practical jokers... and the ones that dropped that toffee, that made your tongue..."

A cloud passed over Dudley's face. "Oh." They continued walking.

"They're nice guys, really," said Harry. "They did that kind of thing to everybody, including me. It's just that with us, they have a reputation, so we know to expect it."

They stopped at Florean Fortescue's for a snack, which the owner insisted was on the house, despite Harry's protestations. Harry continued to be approached at least once every five minutes, and after they had been there for an hour and a half, Harry had had enough, and asked Dudley if he minded leaving. Dudley nodded his assent, but before they could leave, Harry was approached again, by a large man with dark hair who appeared to be in his late twenties. "You're Harry Potter! Maybe you can do something. My wife has been waiting all day to get into Gringotts. Can you try to talk to the goblins, get them to start letting people in?" His tone was insistent, as if he expected that Harry would naturally do as he asked.

Harry had to restrain himself from responding snidely, as it was such an absurd question. "They're not going to listen to me," he responded.

"Can't you at least try? If they'd listen to anybody, it would be you!"

What is wrong with this guy, thought Harry. "I promise you, they are not going to listen to anything I say, unless it's an apology. Would you like me to apologize to them?" Harry noticed that the conversation was now being watched by at least a half dozen onlookers.

"Whatever it takes! My wife and I need to get our gold! You know, we need it to live!" he added sarcastically. "You already got yours!"

“Would you rather I hadn’t beaten Voldemort?” Harry asked, his temper rising.

“I’d rather get my gold!”

“And I’m not the one you should be complaining to! Now, excuse me, I have to be going.” Harry turned to Dudley and started to wrap his right arm around Dudley’s left, preparing to Disapparate. The man put his hand on Harry’s shoulder as if to stop him from leaving; Harry whirled to face him. “Look—“

Two onlookers stepped forward and started to restrain the man. “What do you think you’re doing?” demanded a middle-aged man of the one who had been harassing Harry. “This is Harry Potter! Do you not think he’s done enough, that he needs to go crawling to the goblins, pleading, apologizing for saving us all from You-Know-Who?”

Harry couldn’t help himself. “Voldemort,” he corrected the man.

“Er, yes,” the man replied nervously.

“But, thank you,” added Harry. “I really did need to get going. Excuse me.” He quickly wrapped his arm around Dudley’s, and Disapparated.

They looked around the Burrow’s living room. “Well, not everyone loves me, apparently,” he muttered to Dudley.

“Ah, Harry, there you are,” said Molly, walking into the living room from the kitchen. “And you must be Dudley, it’s nice to meet you.” Molly took over for Harry, talking to Dudley about the house and the wizarding world in general for over half an hour as she cooked dinner, which Dudley agreed to stay for.

Ron, Hermione, and Arthur came back at six and were introduced to Dudley. Arthur and Ron had encountered, though not formally met, Dudley four years ago, but no one made mention of the fact. They sat down to eat.

“So, Dudley,” said Arthur, obviously trying to make a somewhat nervous Dudley feel at home, “you must have seen a lot of strange things today. What, to you, was the strangest?”

Dudley answered almost immediately. “Him,” he said, gesturing to Harry, who was sitting to Dudley’s right.

Harry noted the others’ surprised reactions. “He means, the fact that people kept talking to me.”

Dudley’s expression communicated that Harry was understating the case. “Talking, praising, kissing, offering jobs. At some point, I started expecting people to just come up to him and give him money.”

Ron and Hermione laughed. “Not like he needs it,” said Ron. “But what’s this about kissing?”

“Ron,” Hermione chided him. “You know it was just the grateful kind.”

“No one’s kissed me out of gratitude yet,” Ron pointed out.

She regarded him sternly. “And you’d like random women to walk up to you and kiss you?”

Harry was surprised that Ron hadn’t seen that coming. “Well, no...”

“Liar,” she retorted.

Harry grinned. “They’re my friends, but they’re also a couple,” he explained to Dudley.

“So, Harry,” said Arthur, “that was job offers, plural?”

Harry nodded. “There were...”

“Four, I think,” put in Dudley. “Some job where they wanted him to be a board member of some company...”

“The kind of thing where I wouldn’t really have to work, they’d just pay me to use my name,” explained Harry with disdain.

“That, and the one about doing spells on things to make them more powerful, is all I could remember,” continued Dudley.

“People know I have the Elder Wand, and someone wants to make money from selling products enhanced by it,” added Harry.

“People think of everything, don’t they,” muttered Hermione.

“Then there was that sport that starts with Q, with the brooms...”

“Ah, yes,” said Ron. “I knew that would be happening sooner or later. Which team?”

“The Wasps,” said Harry.

Ron shook his head. “The Cannons, Harry. Nothing but the Cannons.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Ron, I don’t think Harry’s going to play Quidditch for a living.”

Harry shrugged. “I might. Who knows? At least that’s something I have some ability at, instead of just using my name.”

“You have ability at a lot of things, Harry,” Molly assured him. “But at least it’s nice to know you have options. What was the last one?”

Harry couldn’t remember. “That woman,” Dudley supplied. “Something about the wizard game... the lawyer thing—”

“Oh, the Wizengamot,” exclaimed Harry. “I’d forgotten that one.”

Arthur and Molly exchanged stunned expressions. “You were offered a place on the Wizengamot?” asked an amazed Arthur.

“Yeah, that was the only one that surprised him,” said Dudley. “Is it a big deal?”

“You could say that,” said Arthur. “I’m pretty sure that nobody under the age of thirty has ever been offered a spot. It’s very prestigious. You are going to take it, aren’t you, Harry?”

“Like I said, I’m not going to take or not take anything for a while.”

“That reminds me,” said Arthur, “you will have to decide about one of them fairly soon. Kingsley told me today that McGonagall offered you the Defense Against the Dark Arts position, so you’d have to decide that in a few months.”

Now Ron and Hermione exchanged shocked looks. “You never told us that!” said Hermione accusingly. “You have to take it! A Hogwarts teacher!”

“That kind of reaction,” said Harry, annoyed, “is the reason I didn’t tell you. I said before, I’ll do what I want to do, when I want to do it. Not because somebody thinks I should.”

“All right, all right, you don’t have to jump down my throat,” responded Hermione. “I forgot for a minute. But it’s so great, I’d love to be a Hogwarts professor! I can’t imagine you wouldn’t—okay, never mind, never mind,” she quickly added, catching herself.

“Did you go near Gringotts?” asked Arthur.

“I deliberately went nowhere near it.”

Arthur nodded. “Wise move. Today being the first day of freedom of movement in Diagon Alley, quite a line formed. The goblins, from what I hear, barely bothered to pretend that they were helping customers. It got to be quite a scene, people were yelling, practically ready to riot.”

Harry told them what had happened just before they’d left Diagon Alley; Arthur nodded. “It’s not too surprising, sadly. People may admire you, but if it’s a choice between that and their gold, they’ll choose the gold. And, oh, we heard what you said, in that letter you wrote to that man, Kassant. I completely agree, of course.”

Ron chuckled. "When I first heard it, I had a good laugh. It's so Harry. Like I said, the Voldemort police."

"Oh, that. People know about that already?"

Ron gave him an exasperated look. "Yes, Harry, when you write somebody a letter, they mention it to no one, keep it a total secret. Because nobody cares about anything you have to say."

Very funny, Harry said to Ron with his eyes. "I just wouldn't have expected it. I didn't mind his editorial; he has a right to say what he wants to say. I just thought I should answer it."

"People were talking about it at the Ministry," said Arthur. "It'll be in tomorrow's Prophet, and copies of it were circulating. Obviously almost everyone agrees with you; some people were saying that you shouldn't have written it, that Kassant's argument didn't deserve to be dignified with an answer. A few people described him as a goblin 'apologist,' and another said he just sees things more from their point of view, from dealing with them so much." A glance at Dudley told Harry that he had no idea what they were talking about, but had no plans to ask. Molly noted this as well, and spent a few minutes explaining to Dudley about goblins and their place in the wizarding community. It seemed to Harry that Dudley was interested, but had taken in too much new information in a short time.

"So, Dudley," said Molly, "will you be seeing your parents again soon?" She said it with a casual air, even though she had to know it could be sensitive.

Dudley looked slightly alarmed. "Molly," said Harry, an edge to his voice. "He will if he wants to."

"There's no need for that tone," Molly chided him, in a tone he was well familiar with from hearing it used on her own children. "She's his mother. She'll get over this business of his being a wizard. I know she doesn't like them, but I'm speaking as a mother. Why wouldn't she want to see him?"

To Harry's shock, Dudley answered. "Because she saw me kill someone," he said quietly, looking around for reactions.

"Accidentally," Harry cut in emphatically. "And only because they tried to kill you first. You say it like that, Dudley, it makes it sound like you're a murderer." Harry quickly told the story to the Weasleys and Hermione; their at first appalled faces softened as they understood what had happened.

Molly spoke gently. "Dudley, Harry is right. You should never put it that way, especially when telling people who don't know. It was an accident." Looking down, Dudley nodded.

Ron looked at Dudley with a serious expression. "To tell you the truth, Dudley, I think what you did was a good thing. It's what you should do in that situation, really the only thing to do."

"Not that we normally advocate killing," put in Arthur. "But Ron has a point. I wonder, why when that man didn't return, didn't Voldemort just send someone else?"

"I thought about that," said Harry. "I think that he captured Dedalus, or was in charge of his interrogation. Probably him alone. The man tortured him, Dedalus told them where the Dursleys were, and he realized he might have a way to me. I think he let the dementors have him so he couldn't tell any other Death Eaters, then tried to get Vernon and Petunia by himself. If he could get me, or even my location, alone—"

"There'd be a big reward in it for him," finished Ron. "Makes sense. So, when he died, nobody knew where he'd gone, or why. Lucky for Dudley's parents."

"You shouldn't feel bad about what you did, Dudley," said Molly. "We just need to make sure you can learn how to do magic. I was looking into it, and I went to the Ministry this afternoon. There's a woman who's in charge of this sort of thing, she can help you, give you some advice. Definitely the best thing to do is to go to the adult education schools." Molly continued talking about what Dudley should do, as Harry and Ron exchanged a 'there she goes again' glance.

“And you’ll need a place to stay, of course,” she continued. “We’d be happy to let you stay here for the time being, or of course, you could stay at Harry’s place.”

Alarmed, Harry jumped in quickly. “Dudley has his own place, in the Muggle world. There’s no reason he needs to stay here.”

“Yes, Harry,” responded Molly, “but it may be better right now for him to be with other wizards, to get used to things in our world.” To Harry’s relief, however, the topic was dropped soon thereafter, and conversation continued.

After dinner, Molly asked Harry to go upstairs with her; she steered him into their bedroom, and they sat. “Harry,” she began, disappointment in her voice, “why didn’t you tell us what he had done? That was very important!”

“It was an accident! You know that,” he responded, unsure why she was so upset.

“I don’t mean that. I mean that it was an urgent matter! That boy needs help! I mean, psychological help. Were you just going to leave him to deal with that by himself?”

“I was going to let him decide when and how to tell people,” said Harry defensively. “It was obviously a hard topic for him, and I wanted to respect that. At some point, I would have suggested to him that he talk to someone about it. But he’s been dealing with this for three months, what difference will a week make?”

“Sometimes we need to help people, even if they don’t seem to want help,” she said, giving him a significant look.

He thought he understood her unspoken message. “And sometimes, it’s best not to give people help they don’t want, until they’re ready for it. And also...” He hesitated to say what came next, because he didn’t want to alienate her, but it was important. “If you want him to stay here, that’s up to you. But please don’t volunteer me or my place without asking me first.”

“He’s your cousin,” she said, again with disappointment in his attitude. “You grew up with him. I thought you’d want him to stay with you.”

“You were wrong,” said Harry, more emotionally than he meant to. “I need my space right now, I’m not ready to have someone move in with me. And I may have grown up with him, but his mother raised him to treat me like dirt, approved while he chased me, insulted me, you name it. That’s not the reason I don’t want him staying with me. I do feel bad for him. But you shouldn’t make assumptions about situations you don’t know about.”

He saw surprise, and hurt feelings, in her eyes. Already emotional, not trusting himself to become more so, he quickly stood and left the bedroom. He composed his face while going down the stairs, and joined the conversation in the living room between Ron, Hermione, and Dudley. He avoided Molly for the rest of the evening.

Later that night, as he lay in bed trying to sleep, he replayed the incident in his head. He was frustrated because he didn’t think he’d asked anything unreasonable, but he’d obviously gotten Molly upset with him. I just wish she’d stop telling me what to do, he thought. I know what Ron said, but I couldn’t just ignore her this time. Maybe I should have asked him what to do in this kind of situation. After a while, he drifted onto another topic in his mind, and fell asleep.

* * * * *

The next morning went as usual; he noticed, to his relief, that the mail seemed to be slowing down. There were only ten letters since the night before, and half of those had to do with the goblin situation. There was one from Narcissa Malfoy, which read simply, “Check your mirror at 10:00.” Yes, because my day wouldn’t feel right without an unpleasant conversation with that woman, he thought. I’ll be glad when this thing is over.

At a quarter to ten, Ron came through the fireplace holding a piece of paper. After quickly exchanged greetings, Ron handed him the paper. “This is the latest from the goblins. They opened almost two hours

ago, and if you want to get into your vault, you have to sign this piece of paper.”

Harry read it out loud. “I do hereby acknowledge and understand that Gringotts has recently suffered structural and other damage due to a recent robbery. I acknowledge and understand that this has caused unfortunate delays in Gringotts’ service, and that Gringotts is not responsible for these delays. I acknowledge and understand that these delays are the responsibility of the criminals Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley, and Hermione Granger, and I agree to support their arrest and conviction in a court of law.” He looked up at Ron. “We’re famous criminals!”

Ron grinned. “I always knew that if I stuck with you, I’d really go places.”

Harry chuckled, and resumed reading. “I hereby agree that their actions are wholly unsupportable and unpardonable, and I agree to petition the Ministry of Magic to promptly bring charges against them. I acknowledge and understand that by signing this form, I am promising to send the Ministry of Magic a letter to this effect within the next twenty-four hours. I sign this form in earnest good faith, and hold Gringotts harmless of any responsibility for results of any fraud I may commit. Signed...” Harry looked up at Ron incredulously. “What happens if you don’t sign?”

“You don’t get your money.” Ron nodded for emphasis, a ‘can you believe this?’ expression on his face.

“Wow... and if you sign, you get your money?”

“Apparently a few dozen people have gotten theirs by signing; you’re in and out with their usual efficiency. But the interesting thing is, it’s being rumored that the form is jinxed. Remember fifth year, that girl Marietta, oh, what’s her last name... starts with ‘e’... Cho’s friend...”

“I remember. ‘Sneak.’ Go on.”

“Anyway, that bit about results of fraud has a lot of people thinking that anybody who signs but doesn’t send the letter to the Ministry is

going to get a nasty surprise twenty-four hours later. Some people even think that if you sign, send the letter, but don't really believe what you're saying, bad things will happen. I'm not sure if they can do that by magic or not."

"Incredible. Wonder what Kingsley thinks of this."

"Dad says that he thinks—he hasn't talked to Kingsley about this topic, he wants to stay away from stuff that isn't in his area—that Kingsley is treating this as just a political issue, and will do what's best politically. To some extent. I mean, if he could benefit politically by attacking you, of course he wouldn't do it. But he doesn't mind attacking the goblins. But if he keeps escalating, and they keep escalating... I don't know what's going to happen. Anyway, people are really angry about this."

"Do the goblins think this is going to accomplish anything?" Harry wondered.

"I'm not sure. Dad said he thinks their objective is to make everyone sign, and consider that a moral victory. But he thought it might be a good idea if you were to go there, and suggest to people that they at least wait twenty-four hours before they sign it."

Not thrilled with the idea, Harry said, "You'd think that people could think of that by themselves. And why me, not some Ministry type?"

"It would mean more coming from you. Look, no big deal if you don't; he just thought it might help some people. But especially after last night, he doesn't want to push you to do anything."

Harry grunted. "As long as I don't have to put anybody up at my home..."

"Yeah, that wasn't Mum's best suggestion," agreed Ron sympathetically.

"Okay. I have to talk to Narcissa in a few minutes, but this shouldn't take that long. You'll come with me?"

“Sure.” They stood and Disapparated, finding themselves in front of Gringotts. A long line was snaking out from the front door; ropes cordoned off the line into rows, so it appeared as one large group. Harry estimated that there were at least a hundred people.

A gasp went up as everyone saw him. A few people started applauding, and soon, most of those waiting were. Very embarrassed, Harry felt his cheeks redden. He put up his hands to ask for silence. “Thank you. I came to say a few words, but I didn’t expect to get applauded.”

“We don’t blame you for this,” a middle-aged woman said loudly, from the middle of the crowd.

“Thanks, I appreciate that,” he said. “I just wanted to say this—“

“Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley,” a well-dressed goblin said, appearing at the front doors of Gringotts. “Would you step inside for a moment?”

Harry was surprised at the audacity of the request. Belligerently, Ron said to the goblin, “Excuse me, but is there a sign on me that says ‘I’m stupid’ and nobody told me about it?” Harry chuckled, and some of the crowd laughed. “I think your actions have spoken for themselves,” said Harry to the goblin. “I just have a few things to say, and then I’ll be going.” The goblin looked around, then retreated into Gringotts.

“Anyway,” Harry said to the crowd, “Ron just told me about this form they want you to sign. I really have no opinion about whether anyone signs it or not. What Gringotts is doing is wrong, and it puts you in a very bad position. You don’t want to say what they would have you say, but you need and deserve to get your money. It’s a lot like blackmail.

“I would just say this: it is possible to charm parchment, I’m sure you know, so that it punishes someone who signs it under false pretenses. Some people have already signed it, and probably at least some didn’t really mean it, or agree with what it said. I’d suggest that even if you’re inclined to sign it, you may want to wait a day, and see if

anything happened to those who did sign. It just seems like a prudent thing to do.”

A man walked out of the crowd that was waiting. “Mr. Potter, I’m very disappointed to hear you say that.”

“Well, that’s your privilege,” said Harry politely. “And you are?”

“Pietr Kassant. I wrote the—“

“Ah, yes, that I should apologize. Nice to meet you.”

Kassant seemed taken aback by Harry’s politeness. “Uh, yes, you too. Thank you very much for responding to my editorial, and I will try in the future to use... Voldemort’s name, if necessary in context.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that,” said Harry sincerely.

“Yes. Well, I understand why you do not wish to apologize, but spreading such rumors and speculation as this not only serves no purpose, it exacerbates the situation. I have been trying to address the concerns of the community, working to reconcile humans and goblins. Your actions cannot help but have the effect of undermining such efforts.”

“Well, that’s definitely not my intention,” said Harry. “I’d be very happy if you found a way to put an end to this situation. I’m just not going to say anything that isn’t true to do that.” A few people applauded. “And as far as what I’m saying, can you really say that you’re 100% sure that they wouldn’t do such a thing?”

“I have dealt with goblins for most of my adult life,” said Kassant, somewhat self-importantly. “I have never known them to resort to such trickery.”

“Have you ever known them to resort to not allowing people to go into their vaults? Or to make public how much gold I have, and when my house-elf took it out?” There were murmurs of agreement from the crowd.

Kassant appeared discomfited. "Well, yes, these are unusual circumstances. But one must admit that..."

As Kassant spoke, a paper airplane, much like the ones Harry had seen flying around the Ministry, flew out of Gringotts' doors and towards Harry. He reached out to take it, and was suddenly yanked back by Ron, who had grabbed his shoulders. "Are you a moron?" shouted Ron angrily. "Don't touch that thing!"

"Why not?" asked Harry, confused.

Ron held Harry's arms, not letting go. "You were just talking about enchanted parchment! That thing could easily be a Portkey, and probably is! You touch that, and the next thing you know, you're deep in a Gringotts vault, and the goblins will be telling the Ministry that they'll let you go as soon as they have everything they want."

Embarrassed and mildly annoyed, Harry muttered to Ron, "You can let go now, I promise not to touch it." Ron let go, but kept a wary eye on Harry, and the paper airplane that now hovered in front of him.

Kassant approached them. "Mr. Weasley, please. You are accusing the Gringotts goblins of kidnapping, with no evidence whatsoever. Again, this does not help matters."

"Well, then, maybe you'd like to open it, tell us all what it says," Ron challenged him; the crowd murmured again.

Slightly hesitant at first, Kassant gathered himself. "Of course, I will do so. No doubt it is simply a missive from the goblins, an invitation to open negotiations." He reached out, grasped the airplane, and disappeared.

The crowd gasped. After a few seconds of silence, Ron said to Harry in a casual tone, "I wonder how the negotiations are going," prompting laughter from some of the crowd.

"Well, he seems like a nice man, and he means well," observed Harry. "I do hope he comes back all right."

“Harry,” said Ron, as the crowd watched, “one thing I want to say before I forget. From now on, you do not touch anything in a public place that you didn’t put there, or that you didn’t see being put there. Do you understand?” Ron was wearing his most serious expression.

Harry was tempted to say something like ‘yes, dear,’ but Ron’s manner, and the close call he’d just had, told him not to. “I promise,” he said. Ron nodded, satisfied.

Harry looked at the crowd. “That kind of thinking from Ron, and Hermione, is a big part of the reason I’m still alive and in one piece.” The crowd applauded; Harry turned to Ron and added his own applause. Embarrassed, Ron thanked the crowd. “Well, anyway, that was all I wanted to say,” said Harry. “At this point, I think anyone should think twice about signing anything the goblins put in front of you whether you agree with it or not, but I’d guess you probably worked that out for yourselves.” He turned to Ron. “Back home?” Ron nodded, and they Disapparated.

In the living room of Grimmauld Place, Harry looked at the clock. “Ten exactly,” he said. He walked over to the mail desk and picked up the mirror case, pulling out the mirror. To his surprise, the face he saw was that of Draco Malfoy. “Draco!”

Malfoy’s eyebrows went up, but his perpetual sneer was still there. “‘Draco?’ What, are we suddenly friends now?”

Harry bit back the sarcastic responses that jumped to the front of his mind. “No, but I’ve been dealing with your mother, so I started referring to you as Draco, just to keep it straight. Got in the habit. But I’d be happy to call you ‘Malfoy’ if you’d prefer.”

“Whatever, I don’t care,” said Malfoy.

Harry nodded. “I guess this means you’ll talk to me.”

“I’ll talk to you. But no Veritaserum.”

“No Veritaserum, no deal. Sorry.”

“And would you like me to grease up my asshole for you too, while we’re at it?” snarled Malfoy. Harry’s eyebrows went high; he tried not to look at Ron, as Malfoy would then know that someone else was there.

“Listen, Malfoy, there’s just no other way I can do this. You did things that could have caused deaths. I have no way of knowing if you’ve decided that dealing with someone like Voldemort is a bad idea, or if you just got unlucky, and plan to choose the next Dark wizard you ally yourself with more carefully. Before I can say a word on your behalf, I have to know the truth, and this is the only way to do that. I can see why you don’t like it. I wouldn’t either. But this isn’t negotiable.”

Malfoy paused, clearly about to say something he was unhappy to have to say. “He tortured the hell out of all of us, you know.”

Harry nodded. “I know.”

Malfoy blinked. “You know? How?”

Harry shook his head. “Not up for discussion. But I know. It was right after we escaped from Malfoy Manor.”

Malfoy was both puzzled and outraged. “And that doesn’t persuade you of anything?”

“Only that he held your family responsible for failures. Your father failed to get the prophecy two years ago, and then he gave you the task of killing Dumbledore—a task which you accepted, intending to carry it out—expecting you to fail, as punishment for your father’s failure.” Harry could see the astonishment on Malfoy’s face at the extent of Harry’s knowledge. “I know you and your family suffered at his hands, but it wasn’t because you had a change of heart; it was because he saw your family as having failed at tasks. That only persuades me that you don’t like to be tortured, which is understandable.”

“Then what the hell do you hope to find out?”

"If, after talking to you, I can honestly say what I want to say to the Wizengamot, then I will. Now, I'm not convinced."

Clearly furious, Malfoy was silent, thinking. Harry said nothing, waiting for a response. Finally, it came. "Nothing I say would be used as evidence against me in the Wizengamot."

Harry thought for a moment. "Agreed."

"Nothing I say will be repeated to a single person."

Again, a pause. "With one exception. Ron will be told anything he wants to know. He'll tell no one else."

"Why him?"

"He was almost killed by that poisoned mead you tried to send Dumbledore. Consider it the price you pay for that attempted murder, and if it's the only price you pay, it's a very small one."

"That wasn't me."

"I don't believe you. If I find it really wasn't you, Ron will be told nothing."

"Just you and me, in a room? Where? When?"

"Just you and me. Hog's Head, 10:00 a.m. tomorrow. Aberforth will stay in his living quarters in the back." That reminds me, I'd better talk to Aberforth today, he thought.

"As few people as possible will know that this is happening; you will not tell the Wizengamot how you got this information."

Harry wondered why that was so important, then he realized that Malfoy considered it humiliating, and so wanted the knowledge to be limited. "Agreed."

"Who exactly will know?"

“Aberforth. Horace Slughorn.” Malfoy’s eyebrows rose. “He gave me the Veritaserum,” explained Harry. “I had to tell him, and I asked him to tell no one else. Those two, and Ron and Hermione. No one else.”

“Why her?” asked Malfoy, with obvious annoyance.

“She and Ron are my two closest friends, as you well know.”

“You said no one else would know what was said,” pointed out Malfoy accusingly.

“If I end up testifying for you, if anyone else asks me, I’ll just tell them that I’m convinced it’s the right thing to do, no reason or explanation given. But Hermione wouldn’t buy that, she’d want to know details. I’ll tell her how I got the information, not what the information is.”

Malfoy paused. “Ten o’clock. You be early; I’ll be exactly on time. No Aurors or other undesirables.”

“None,” agreed Harry. The mirror suddenly showed his own face again. He looked up at Ron. “I guess his mother told him to be polite. I thought for sure he was going to use the word ‘Mudblood’ when I mentioned Hermione.”

“I was surprised that you were as polite as you were,” said Ron.

“He already feels humiliated just doing this, and I do understand why. I don’t want him to think I’m enjoying it. And really, I’m not. If there was another way to do it, I would.”

Ron grunted. “All the crap he’s done to us in the past... if I were in your shoes, I’m not sure I could be quite that noble.”

“Well, we did get to see him bounce around as a ferret.”

Ron laughed. “That’s true. Ah, the cherished memories... so, you’re really not going to tell Hermione what he says? Or me, if he really didn’t send the mead?”

“He was lying. He sent it, or had it sent. I’d be shocked if that wasn’t the case. But as for Hermione, or anyone else... not that he deserves that consideration, but what I’m making him do is a lot. I just wouldn’t feel right.”

“I guess I understand,” allowed Ron. “But again, you’re more noble than me.”

“Well, you seem to be more clever than me,” said Harry, referring to the paper airplane at Gringotts.

“Must be from being around Hermione all that time. Maybe it’s rubbing off on me.”

Harry grinned. “If you get married, in twenty years, you’ll be a genius.”

“I can only hope,” replied Ron. “See you later.” He exited through the fireplace.

* * * * *

Harry took a quick trip to the Hog’s Head, making sure to get there before Aberforth opened for business for the day. Aberforth agreed to host Harry’s meeting with Malfoy, expressing annoyance that Harry hadn’t asked him first. Apologizing, Harry asked for permission to pay for Neville’s tab at the Hog’s Head. “Don’t matter to me who pays it,” said Aberforth. Harry gave him two Sickles and twenty Galleons, asking that the balance be applied to future visits from anyone who fought in the final battle.

He relaxed for the next few hours, reading books and the latest Witch Weekly, which contained a long article on what had happened at Hogwarts over the past year, with special emphasis on Dumbledore’s Army.

He heard footsteps from the staircase, and a voice. “Harry?”

“In here,” he shouted, from his spot on the sofa.

Kingsley walked into the living room. "How are you doing?" he asked as he took a seat in a comfortable chair opposite Harry.

"Just fine. Thanks to Ron, I suppose."

"Yes, we'll have to give him another few rubies. Good presence of mind."

"Well, one of us has to have it, and since Hermione wasn't there, it had to be him."

Kingsley chuckled. "I guess so. Just so you know, in general, you're supposed to report things like attempted kidnapping to the authorities."

"I guess I'm used to living at Hogwarts. But I'll keep it in mind."

Kingsley's tone became more serious. "Well, Harry, this has now become something entirely different. Keeping people from their gold was bad, but not irrevocable. But this... this makes it extremely difficult to negotiate with them at all."

"I thought you weren't negotiating with them anyway."

"I would have eventually. Putting them off was partly a negotiating tactic, and partly for politics: their demands were truly ridiculous. My goblin advisers said—"

"You have goblins advising you?"

"No, I mean, those who advise the Minister on goblin affairs—"

"Oh, sorry. Go ahead."

"They didn't think the goblins would react this badly, or escalate things as they have. Apparently this is somewhat out of character for them, to be quite this aggressive. Attempted kidnapping is bad enough, but for it to be you makes it more than twice as bad."

"Are goblins covered under wizarding laws?" wondered Harry.

“Not exactly, but they’ve always followed our laws; one of their laws is to follow our laws. I’m now told that my pardon of you and the others has prompted the goblins to more or less disregard wizarding law, since in their eyes, I’ve already disregarded it. Not that I did anything wrong; any Minister who didn’t pardon you would have suffered greatly politically. It’s just a sort of convergence of unfortunate circumstances, one of which is an extremely hard line on their part. It’s been suggested to me that one possible reason they’ve taken this line is that they thought that I, as a new Minister and inexperienced at politics, might be more easily pushed around.”

Harry scoffed. “It didn’t occur to them that anyone who fought Voldemort probably isn’t easily pushed around?”

“Yes, I’ve been quite surprised,” agreed Kingsley. “They really seem not to understand us very well.”

“What’s going to happen next?”

“The rules have changed, since we can no longer count on them to follow wizarding law. I’ll probably make a statement to the effect that until further notice, people deal with Gringotts at their own risk. I could, and I’m tempted to, decree that people are not to deal with Gringotts at all, but then I’d be blamed for people not being able to get their gold. This way, the blame stays with the goblins.”

“Is it really worth worrying about who gets blamed, if people end up getting hurt or kidnapped because of it?” asked Harry, dismayed at Kingsley’s attitude.

Kingsley nodded. “I feel the same way, of course. You don’t know this, because you’re young, and I frankly envy you your lack of knowledge. But politics is a very strange animal, with its own rules. The Minister gets blamed for bad things that happened under him, and gets credit for good things, even if he did nothing to cause them, either way. In many cases, you have to do what the people would have you do, because you’re in trouble if you don’t—particularly me, since I’m more or less on probation in this job.

“For example, I have to make a speech later, to address their attempted kidnapping of you. Now, I’m not personally all that upset about it, because I’ve been around. I saw a memory of what happened, and from the look of it, even you didn’t take it especially personally. You seemed more annoyed than anything else, and embarrassed that you didn’t think of it being a Portkey. But I have to go out there and act as if I’m really angry at the goblins, because if I don’t, people will feel like I don’t care. The Minister has to represent people; they have to feel that he cares about the things they care about. I care about your safety, of course, but more in the way of actually doing something about it, rather than getting angry and indignant. I’m telling you this because when you hear what I said later, it won’t sound like me, what you know of me. You’ll think, what’s he getting all excited about? I just wanted you to know the reason.”

“Thanks,” said Harry, nodding thoughtfully. “You’re right, I don’t know much about this, and really, I don’t want to.”

“I hate to tell you this, but you’re going to have to, at some point. Maybe not soon, but you are Harry Potter. You are, and will be, one of the most important and popular people in wizarding society. You won’t be able to avoid getting involved in politics, at least to some extent.”

“Well, you hate to tell me it, and I hate to hear it,” joked Harry.

Kingsley grinned. “Sorry.”

“You came here just to tell me that?”

“Partly. Another important reason is to emphasize what Ron said at Gringotts. Not only about not touching anything, but also keeping in mind that you’re under threat in general, and not to take your safety for granted. I’m sorry to tell you that, too, because you deserve to relax.”

Harry shrugged. “Well, I haven’t been going out in public much anyway, so this is just another reason not to. Gives me a chance not to do what I don’t want to do.”

“Not that I want you to hide, but of the situations I’d like to deal with, having to dig you out of Gringotts is very low on the list. You get yourself kidnapped, when we get you back, you’ll have to listen to a lecture from me.” He paused. “Get yourself killed, though, and you avoid the lecture.”

Harry laughed. “I’ll keep that in mind. Just curious, you couldn’t rescue someone who was being held in Gringotts?”

“Aurors have gamed that out before, and we don’t think so. Gringotts is full of defenses, both magical and solid, lots of doors made of dragon hide, and so forth. It’s not impenetrable, but it’s the nearest thing to it.”

Harry noticed something Kingsley had said in passing. “You said ‘we’ don’t think so. You’re not exactly an Auror anymore, are you?”

“Not officially, no, because I had to quit when I started openly opposing the Ministry. So did Hestia; one of my first actions as Minister was to hire her back again officially. But I still feel as though I’m an Auror, so I used the word ‘we.’ One regret I have about this job is that I can’t be an Auror too. Hestia is more or less my back-channel liaison to the Aurors.” Becoming somber, he said, “I heard that she told you about the Auror situation now. That’s another thing that’s weighing on me, to be honest. You’d think that I could do something about it as Minister, but that’s not really the case.”

Kingsley seemed about to continue, but the fireplace lit up, and Bill walked out. “Hi, Harry, Kingsley. I can come back later if I’m interrupting anything.”

“No, it’s okay, I should be leaving anyway,” said Kingsley. “I heard what happened, Bill. I’m sorry.”

Bill shrugged. “It’s starting to look like it was good for me to get out when I did. I’m amazed they resorted to attempted kidnapping, Kingsley. Not that they’re the most ethical beings in the world, but they usually know what’s in their best interests, and that sure isn’t. I’m sure others will be following me out the door. One or two already

have, Harry, which is what I came over to tell you. The first two hires, people whose competence and integrity I have total confidence in.”

Harry nodded. “Sounds good. I know you can’t do this by yourself. I’d help, except I know nothing about this.” He paused a beat, then added, “Also, I don’t want to.”

Bill laughed. “That would be a problem, yes.”

“Don’t want to do what?” asked Kingsley.

“We’re making a new bank,” said Harry casually. “Well, Bill is. I’m just providing the money, avoiding actual work.”

“You’re what?” asked a stunned Kingsley. “With what money? What’s in your vault is nowhere near enough.”

“Very annoying that everyone now knows what’s in my vault. Well, what used to be there, anyway.” He pulled out his wand, pointing it at the wall. “Toujours Pur.” The wall opened up, displaying the Black family fortune, as Harry explained the background to Kingsley.

Harry had never seen Kingsley look so surprised. “And when were you planning on telling me this?” He looked back and forth to Harry and Bill.

“I don’t know,” said Harry. “At some point. Why?”

Incredulous, Kingsley gestured to Bill. “Maybe you can answer, and explain it to him.”

Slightly uncomfortable, Bill said to Harry, “He means that it could be very politically significant. If people see that there’s an alternative to Gringotts, it could go a long way towards making Kingsley’s life easier, and help his negotiating position with the goblins. He also wants to know why I didn’t tell him, since I know the political significance.” Turning to Kingsley, he said, “With Harry’s permission, I would have told you within three or four days. This only started a few days ago, and it’s in the early planning stages. I didn’t want to tell you, only to

find that there was some reason it couldn't be done. I wanted to be a little more sure."

Kingsley sighed. "I was all ready to be annoyed, but I guess I can understand that. I take it that you'd prefer that this wasn't public yet?"

Bill nodded. "If you want it as a rumor, you can do that. Tell a bunch of high officials that a wizard bank is in the planning stages, maybe an announcement in a week or two, it'll leak out. It might get the goblins to tone it down a bit. But, of course, no names until I'm ready."

"Thanks," said Kingsley. "I'll let you know if and when I do. So, how are you going to approach the business?"

"Harry wants it to be a nonprofit," joked Bill. "Help the needy, like that, especially Muggle-borns. I'm thinking more in terms of consumer loans, business loans, probably low-interest loans for the needy. I know Harry doesn't care about losing money. I'd also compete for some of the institutional business that the goblins now dominate. Other things being equal, I probably wouldn't get it, but..."

"Other things are definitely not equal," finished Kingsley. "I'd put in some political muscle for you if you needed it, but I don't think you'll need it. Of course, by then, I may not have it."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," said Bill. "But thanks, I'll keep that in mind. All you could do is get them to give me a chance; I'd have to prove to them that I'm worthy of the business. I'd start with small businesses, since I could probably undercut the goblins' rate without much difficulty. The goblins have been the only game in town for too long."

"I'd ask what you guys are talking about," said Harry, "but—"

"You don't care," finished Bill humorously. Looking at Kingsley, Bill added, "I have a feeling that Harry is going to be a very silent partner in this business. Except for the business about helping people. But when I start to talk about profits and business strategy, his eyes glaze over."

“As befits a true hero,” said Kingsley solemnly.

“Will you two cut it out,” said Harry, in a bored tone. They chuckled.

“Oh, Bill,” said Kingsley, “is it going to be known that it’s his money?”

Bill nodded. “I know he’d rather it wasn’t, but there’s no avoiding it. We have to say whose money it is when we start the business.”

“I could just give it to you,” suggested Harry, only partly in jest.

Bill and Kingsley laughed. “He’d rather give me three million Galleons than admit publicly that it came from him,” said Bill, “because he doesn’t want to be any more of a hero than he already is. Sorry, Harry, but you’re stuck with this one.”

“Damn,” joked Harry with a straight face.

“Well, I should get going,” said Kingsley. “Thank you, Bill. This is very helpful, even if I can’t announce anything. And you, Harry. I know you have no use for the money, but still, it’s very good of you to use it this way. I’ll be in touch.” Kingsley walked upstairs.

Bill looked at Harry quizzically. “Why is he going upstairs?”

“There’s a two-sided Portkey to his office in my bedroom.”

Bill affected an envious expression. “There isn’t a two-sided Portkey to the Minister’s office in my bedroom.”

Harry gestured upstairs. “Feel free to take it.”

Bill laughed. “The fact that you don’t care is, I suspect, one of the reasons it’s there. Anyway, like I said, I came over to tell you about Pamela and Derrick, those are their names. I’ll introduce you to them sometime soon.” Bill chatted with Harry for a few more minutes, then left.

Feeling in the mood for something he hadn't had for a long time, Harry asked Kreacher to make steak for dinner. Kreacher enthusiastically agreed, setting off to buy the food. I'm not going to the Burrow for dinner for a few days, thought Harry. If Ron or Hermione want to talk to me, they can come here.

The next time Harry went up to his bedroom, he saw the Portkey sitting on the desk, uncovered, in front of the portrait of Regulus. Annoyed, he started to cover it when he realized that it looked different. Sitting on the bed to get a better look, careful not to touch it, he realized that it was a different statue entirely, though it was the same color, and made of the same material. He saw the long beard and ornate robe, and realized that it was a statue of Professor Dumbledore.

Smiling, he picked it up, and found himself in Kingsley's office, where Kingsley suddenly stopped talking to Darlene. Still holding the Portkey, Harry gestured with it. "Thanks," he said.

Kingsley nodded. "I realized I made a mistake. This one's much better."

"Yes, it is. Where are they selling these?"

"Same place as the other one, but I had them make it special. These are the only two."

Harry was touched that Kingsley had gone to the trouble and expense, and regarded it as an apology for the last one. He nodded and put it down. "Thanks again," he said, then picked it up, and disappeared.

The rest of the evening went quietly for Harry. He went for an uneventful fly before dinner, then greatly enjoyed his meal. Steak had only been served at Hogwarts once or twice a year, on special occasions, and he had always liked it; Kreacher had cooked it even better than the Hogwarts house-elves had. Thinking about how he'd gotten used to being waited on by house-elves, he felt mildly chagrined, then thought that Hermione would be pleased that she'd

had this effect on him. I'd be hopeless at making my own food, he thought. 'You'd learn,' he heard Hermione say in his mind.

As he tried to sleep later, thoughts of Ginny came unbidden. How in the world do I feel about her, he thought. Why do I not even know? It's like a switch turned in my head or something. He remembered the kiss on his birthday, and how Ron's comment had made him feel guilty about it afterwards, even though she had initiated it. He hadn't led her on. Maybe, he thought, I can't let myself show any interest unless I'm ready to go for it full on? Usually, you gradually work up to a relationship—or so I hear. There aren't any expectations. But now I feel like I can't even send her an owl, because of what she might read into it. But what if she reads into it that I don't send anything? This is so annoying, I have no idea what the hell I should do. But how could I, since I don't know how I feel.

Forcing his mind to another topic, he finally drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 7, Us Against Them: Trying to decide how or whether to repay his debt to Narcissa, Harry meets Draco Malfoy at the Hog's Head; their conversation ends up very differently than Harry had planned.

From Chapter 7: Malfoy became solemn, and there was vulnerability in his eyes; Harry knew that Malfoy was about to say something that he wouldn't say except for the Veritaserum. "My family and I spent the last year in fear, in terror of the Dark Lord, expecting to be killed at any time. Sometimes, your pride is all you have left."

Chapter 7

Us Against Them

Harry could have predicted the headline of the next day's edition of the Daily Prophet: Goblins Attempt To Kidnap Potter. Below the large-type headline were two pictures-in-motion: one showing Ron grabbing Harry to prevent him from touching the paper airplane, and the other one showed Kassant grasping it and disappearing. Editorials loudly demanded retribution, suggesting that Gringotts be forcibly taken from the goblins, or that senior Gringotts goblins be taken into custody. The mildest of the editorials decried the goblins' actions while realistically pointing out that the goblins were safely entrenched in Gringotts and could not be removed, and that little could be done, especially if there was to be any hope that people would get their gold back.

Harry was pleased to read that Kassant had emerged from Gringotts unscathed, but was surprised to find that he left four hours after he disappeared, and made no comments to the media. Interesting, Harry thought, that he didn't say anything defending them.

Harry was interested to read about a public opinion survey taken by the Prophet regarding the Gringotts situation. It didn't surprise Harry that a near-unanimous majority felt that Harry owed the goblins no apology; it did surprise him that 81% felt that he should not apologize even if it meant a high chance that they could never access their Gringotts vaults again. Asked to make a hypothetical choice between Harry apologizing, the Ministry paying the goblins a settlement of half a million Galleons, and an armed raid on Gringotts, 2% of those surveyed chose the first option, 14% the second, and 84% the third.

Following advice given by both Bill and Ron, Harry dealt with the mail a little differently: he used his wand to open every letter, not coming in physical contact with anything. The chances of anything untoward happening were very low, but they didn't want to take any chances. Nothing appeared amiss; the quantity of mail was up a little over the previous day, most of it expressing indignation over the kidnap attempt. One thoughtful writer suggested that he refuse to sign

autographs in public for fear that the proffered pen might be a Portkey, and that Harry carry his own parchment that he could autograph. The writer further suggested that as the one who came up with the idea, he should get the first autograph. Chuckling, Harry obliged him. Not a bad idea, he thought. He had signed a half-dozen autographs in Diagon Alley, unmindful of any danger.

Harry arrived at the Hog's Head at nine-thirty, Apparating directly inside at Aberforth's invitation. They exchanged greetings; Harry asked if Aberforth was getting any business. A little, Aberforth replied. There was still no fireplace, but as with many businesses, there were now two-way Portkeys linking the Hog's Head to Diagon Alley and the Atrium. He could allow Apparition directly inside the place, as some businesses did, but since he lived there as well, he preferred not to.

"Ab," Harry asked, "Do you know anything about girls?"

"Yes. I know enough not to give advice about them."

Harry grinned, then went ahead anyway. "Well, there's this girl, let's call her 'Darlene,'" began Harry, but Aberforth cut him off. "Why don't we just call her Linny, so I really won't know who you're talking about."

"I see," said Harry. "People talk about this?"

"I've been dealing with Hogwarts students for a while. I know far more than I'd like to about who's dating who, who likes who, who wants to be going out with who but can't ask her because he heard that her dormitory-mate likes him and she might be mad at him if he asks the other one, who might say no, and he wouldn't know if it's because she really doesn't like him or if she's doing it just for her friend."

"Are they all like that?"

"No. Most are a lot stupider."

Harry chuckled. "Look," said Aberforth, "I'm no expert, and I'm not about to give specific advice about any situation. My general advice is to communicate directly with the other person, be honest, tell them

what's on your mind. If everyone did that, then at least we would all know where we stood with each other."

"What if, if you did that, it might cause real problems?"

"Then your relationship has real problems."

"Thanks, that's helpful," Harry responded, with light sarcasm.

Aberforth shrugged. "I'm no wordsmith, but sometimes the simplest advice is best."

Able to get nothing more out of Aberforth on the topic, Harry talked with him about other things until ten to ten, when Ron arrived. "Almost no one's waiting in line at Gringotts, I've just heard," he reported. "Also, we know what happens when you sign the form but don't write the letter to the Ministry. Two people were arrested trying to break into Diagon Alley shops before they opened; apparently, they had an uncontrollable compulsion to spend the money they withdrew. It seems that this curse actually causes you pain if you don't spend the money you took out. They're at St. Mungo's now for treatment, and so are four others who managed to wait until the stores opened, then tried to spend huge amounts."

"Nasty," Harry commented. "But, I suppose, not surprising."

"No, not hardly," agreed Ron.

Soon it was 10:00, and exactly on time, Malfoy Apparated directly into the Hog's Head. Aberforth was already in his living quarters; with an unpleasant glance but no words to Malfoy, Ron walked through the door and closed it behind him. Harry performed the soundproofing spell, then gestured Malfoy to a table. They both sat; Harry placed the bottle of Veritaserum on the table. It was a clear bottle, so Harry would know if Malfoy tried to pretend to drink but not really do so.

With a look of great disdain at Harry, Malfoy reached for the bottle, held it to his mouth, and started drinking. Focusing intently on the bottle, Harry didn't see Malfoy surreptitiously reach for his wand and

point it at Harry. Harry suddenly felt disoriented, not totally sure where he was or what was going on.

Malfoy stood, showed Harry the bottle with half the Veritaserum gone, and held it up to Harry's lips. Very disoriented, Harry drank it, as he felt he was supposed to for some vague reason. After it was gone, Malfoy placed the bottle back on the table, pointed the wand at Harry again, and removed the curse. Harry was himself again.

He stared at Malfoy, astonished. He gave voice to his first thought, which seemed to be part of the effect of Veritaserum. "Are you absolutely stupid?" he demanded. "What makes you think I won't walk out of here, go to the Wizengamot, and tell them to hang you up by your thumbs?"

Malfoy shrugged. "If you do, you do. I'll go into hiding. But I am not, for any reason, going to sit here like a sheep while you pull whatever information you want out of my head. We're going to do this on equal terms; that's the only way I can live with it. I have my pride."

Still amazed, Harry asked, "Is your pride worth risking that much for?"

Malfoy became solemn, and there was vulnerability in his eyes; Harry knew that Malfoy was about to say something that he wouldn't say except for the Veritaserum. "My family and I spent the last year in fear, in terror of the Dark Lord, expecting to be killed at any time. Sometimes, your pride is all you have left."

Harry raised his eyebrows and slowly nodded. "Actually, I can understand that."

"I thought you might. Besides, what would you have said if I'd told you that this was the only way I'd do it?"

Harry thought for a few seconds. "I'd have considered it."

Malfoy scoffed. "You liar! You never would have."

"You idiot! What did I just drink, butterbeer? Not quite capable of lying right now, remember?"

“Oh, yeah,” said Malfoy. He looked at Harry closely. “You really would have?”

“I’d have considered it,” Harry repeated. “Don’t know if I’d have done it or not. But I wouldn’t have thought it was unreasonable. I know it’s asking a lot. Like I said, I just can’t do it any other way.”

“So, that was true,” said Malfoy, obviously impressed. “I thought it was just an excuse for you to pull anything out that you pleased.”

“That’s because that’s what it would have been if you were the one doing it,” Harry pointed out.

“That’s true,” admitted Draco. He paused, surprised. “Wow, there’s something I never would have said otherwise.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty strong stuff,” agreed Harry. “It’s like, you just say whatever comes to your mind, you can’t help it. Weird feeling.”

“Did you ever enjoy being the Boy Who Lived?” Malfoy suddenly asked.

“No,” Harry answered instantly. “Hate it. Hate the whole thing, never liked it. Sick of people staring at my forehead, oh, so sorry about your parents, all that. I just wished they’d leave me alone.” He paused. “Did I mention I hate it?”

Malfoy nodded. “You did. I’m... really surprised. I thought you liked it.”

“Again, that’s because you would have liked it if it had happened to you.”

“True,” agreed Malfoy. “Why didn’t you like it?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know. Just didn’t.” After a pause, he added, “Too bad it happened to me, and not you. Then, we both would have been happy.”

Malfoy chuckled. “Yeah, guess so.”

"I suppose it's just different personality types," mused Harry. "I can imagine that a lot of people would have liked it."

"How did you know about how the Dark Lord tortured me and my family?"

Not wanting to take too much time, Harry launched into an explanation of the Horcruxes, and the connection to his scar. "You were a Horcrux?" repeated a stunned Malfoy. "Wow... how did that feel?"

"Not good. Like somebody else was inside there, and of course it was worse that it was Voldemort."

"I can imagine. Well, no, I really can't, but you know what I mean. Now about the Elder Wand, I want to know—"

"Wait," said Harry forcefully, holding up a hand. Malfoy looked up in surprise. "Two things here. One, I think this lasts about an hour, and I don't know how long my questions will take. If it wears off, and I don't have the answers I need—"

"I get it," acknowledged Malfoy. "We should be okay for time, but there are a few things I just have to know. You'll have your time."

"The other thing is that if you ask any questions about the location of the Elder Wand, how to get at it or control it, where I found it, or what I intend to do with it in the future, I'll have no choice but to answer the question, after which—"

"You'll get up and leave," finished Malfoy. "All right, I'll ask those questions in a different way." He paused, thinking. "Will you get up and leave if I ask you why you're so sensitive about anything to do with that wand?"

Clever way to ask, thought Harry. "No, I won't."

"Why are you so sensitive about anything to do with the Elder Wand?"

Harry explained what he'd felt after defeating Voldemort, and his feeling that there was no good hiding place for it. "So, I'm kind of stuck with it."

"You're stuck with the Elder Wand," Malfoy repeated in disbelief. "You're weird, you know that?"

"I've been told," Harry acknowledged. "Ron's exact words were, 'are you mental?'"

"I guess he and I have something in common, then. I'd think most people would want to keep it. Doesn't the—I mean, will you leave if I ask you, doesn't the power of the wand appeal to you?"

"No, I won't. And I'll just answer to save time, so you don't have to ask twice. It doesn't appeal to me because I have no desire to be great, to be rich, to be powerful, to be a hero, even though everyone keeps calling me that. I just want to be a normal person with a normal, happy life. But because I'm 'Harry Potter,' I may not even get that."

Malfoy stared. "You are weird."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yes, we've established that."

With a wry grin, Malfoy mused, "The reluctant hero. The best kind, for a lot of people. Must make you irresistible."

"So Kingsley said. Maybe I should be conceited and arrogant."

"I could give you lessons," offered Malfoy with a small smile.

Harry laughed heartily. "I'm sure you could."

Malfoy's next question was about whether he had really been the master of the Elder Wand at one point; Harry said yes, as far as he could tell. Malfoy seemed almost wistful; Harry thought of asking him if he wished he had it now, but didn't, as the answer was obvious. Malfoy then asked whether Harry planned to use the Elder wand; Harry explained Bill's request, which led to an explanation of the

planned bank. Malfoy looked impressed, but asked no more questions about the bank, or the Elder Wand.

Malfoy's next question surprised Harry. "Have you ever been in the Slytherin common room?"

"Yes," Harry responded. "What made you ask that?"

"The people that brought you to Malfoy Manor told me later you said that. How were you there?"

Harry told the story about the Polyjuice Potion. To Harry's further surprise, Malfoy laughed uproariously. "I thought they were acting strange! Those idiots, couldn't resist a cupcake, didn't ask any questions. When I asked them about it later, they didn't seem to know what I was talking about. I just thought they were being thick. But I also thought it was funny because you thought I was the Heir of Slytherin! I should be flattered, I suppose. It's just really funny. Where was Granger all this time?"

Harry explained; Malfoy went into further hysterics. "A cat! Oh, Merlin..." It took him a minute to calm down. "Oh, Potter, I haven't had that good a laugh in a long time."

Harry wanted to respond 'Glad I could help,' but couldn't, because it wasn't literally true. "I believe that."

"Okay, I think I've done most of the ones I wanted to make sure—oh, wait, one more. First day at Hogwarts, why did you refuse my offer of friendship?"

Harry hadn't thought about that for a long time. "Because you were running down Ron while you were doing it. To be your friend, I had to not be Ron's, and I liked him."

Apparently surprised, Malfoy nodded thoughtfully. "I'd forgotten that Weasley was even involved in that conversation. Now that you mention it, I remember, but I always just thought it was like, I offered you goodwill, you told me to go to hell, and that was that."

“Interesting,” said Harry. “Hermione said once—she read it somewhere, but that almost goes without saying—that memory isn’t that well understood, that we shape it after the fact according to what we think and what we feel. Thinking about it like that, what you said makes sense. If you remember it like that, you can feel more like I’m the bad guy.”

“Granger thinks too much,” said Malfoy disdainfully. “And that whole attention-getting thing was disgusting. ‘Oh, look at me! I know the answer!’ Didn’t that ever get on your nerves?”

“A little bit, at first,” Harry admitted. “Probably if it was someone I didn’t like, I’d have made fun of it too. But if it’s your friend, it seems different. It’s more like a cute quirk than something annoying.”

Malfoy shrugged. “If you say so. It annoyed the crap out of me. Really, I don’t see what Weasley sees in her.”

“You couldn’t want a better friend,” said Harry. “She was always there when you needed her.”

“Did you ever fancy her? Or was Skeeter just wrong about that?”

“Practically every word Skeeter wrote about me was wrong. No, I never fancied her. Just friends.”

“And who do you fancy now?”

Getting annoyed, Harry responded, “I don’t know. And you’re getting into questions I don’t want you getting into.”

“Don’t know?” Malfoy repeated, clearly surprised. “How can you not know who you fancy? ‘No one,’ would be one thing. But, ‘don’t know’...”

“Okay, let’s get to my questions,” said Harry impatiently, hoping he could cut Malfoy off from any further questions along the current lines. He felt he’d been more than patient, showing good will by letting Malfoy go first. “Before you came to Hogwarts, what were the values your parents taught you?”

Malfoy's eyebrows went high. "That's a strange question." He paused, thinking. "To be in control, that was the big thing. Maybe that's why I wouldn't accept the Veritaserum as a one-way deal, even to save my skin. You couldn't be in control less than in that situation. He always said, you have to be in control of every situation. Bend others to your will, make them think you have some power. Be confident. People who passively resist need more persuasion; people who actively resist are enemies. To your enemies, show no mercy, because they wouldn't show any to you. Aside from that, just the usual things. Money is power, Muggles are inferior and fit only to be servants, Mudbloods are a pox on wizardkind, like that. Why did you ask that?"

"I wanted to understand the... I don't know the right word, but like the ground rules, of how you grew up. I figure if I'm going to judge someone's sense of right and wrong, it's good to know what they were taught. But doesn't it strike you as funny, I mean strange, that your father told you to always be in control, then ended up putting his family in a position where they had zero control, basically slaves to Voldemort's whims?"

Harry saw Malfoy's eyes harden. "I hated him for that. Yes, it was strange, or you could say ironic. But I wasn't sure whether I hated that he got us in that position by joining the Dark Lord, or whether it was because he failed. I guess it worked out the same either way. He lost control."

"But he was never in control, if he joined Voldemort," protested Harry. "Even if you were in favor, that could change in a second. All that mattered to him was whether he could use you or not."

"That's life, isn't it, Potter," responded Malfoy. "You deal with people you can use, and if you can't, you don't bother. It's like that for everyone."

"Well, I don't look at life like that," said Harry. "That would be really depressing. I'm pretty sure there's more to life than just getting what we can use. There's friends, for example."

Malfoy looked pensive. "So, Weasley and Granger are your friends. Would you do something for them if they asked that didn't benefit you at all? Even if it hurt your interests in some way?"

Harry couldn't believe Malfoy was asking this. "Of course! That's what friendship is! You feel warmth, closeness, to these people. It's not measured in terms of what they can do for you, just... I don't know, how you feel with them."

"It's funny... I know you're telling the truth, but it seems like a foreign language to me. It sounds stupid, like a fairy tale."

"Well, that's sad."

"I don't want your pity!"

"I'm not trying to pity you. It's the Veritaserum, makes you say what you think."

"Well, stop thinking that."

Harry laughed. "I'll try." He felt he had learned a great deal about Malfoy in that exchange. "How did you feel when you found out that Voldemort came back?"

"Good, like things were going to get better. People like us would rise to the positions we deserved, Muggles and Mudbloods would be put in their place. And I would be one of the favored, because of my birth, because my father had the Dark Lord's favor."

"When did those feelings start to change?"

"A little bit, at the end of fifth year, when my father was captured. I realized that not everything was going to be like I'd thought it would. But I tried to ignore it, because of the task I'd been given. I thought, my father had bad luck, and it's up to me now. I had doubts, but I tried to put them out of my mind."

"Did you feel uncomfortable about the idea of killing Dumbledore?"

“A little, since I’d never killed before. I told myself a lot of things. He’s old, he doesn’t have much time left anyway. He’s probably senile, I’m doing him a favor. He’s standing in the way of the rightful order, he deserves it. I also felt uncomfortable because he’d always been nice to me, even though I wasn’t to him. Asked me how I was doing, talked to me. I figured it was just because I was my father’s son, deserved to be treated with respect.” Harry, trying not to say anything, shook his head slightly, amazed at how little Malfoy understood.

Malfoy saw the gesture. “Okay, then, why did he talk to me?”

“He was worried about you. He knew that you’d been ordered to kill him, and he didn’t want you to do it—for your sake, not his. He felt that if you killed, you’d be irredeemably lost to evil. He was trying to stop that. He told Snape that if it came to that, Snape should kill him, rather than see you do it.”

Malfoy’s mouth hung open. “That was why Dumbledore kept you talking for so long just before he died,” Harry continued. “He hoped to persuade you not to do it, or at least, wait until Snape got there, so he could do it.”

“Now, how the hell could you know that?” Malfoy demanded. Harry explained that he’d been there, frozen, under his Invisibility Cloak. “I didn’t understand it either, at the time. I only understood much later, when I found out he was trying to save you. But when he said, ‘Severus, please...’”

“He was asking Snape to kill him,” Malfoy said, his voice almost a whisper. “So I wouldn’t have to.” Malfoy took a deep breath, and to Harry’s astonishment, a tear fell, then another. As if suddenly realizing it, Malfoy angrily wiped his eyes, but the tears didn’t stop. “What the hell...”

Harry realized he understood. “The Veritaserum must inhibit your ability to control your emotions,” he suggested. “Like when I was pitying you, even if I didn’t intend to. It just comes out.” Harry deliberately looked away, studying something on the wall. He noticed that for the occasion, Arianna’s portrait had been taken down.

Looking down, Malfoy tried to gather himself, taking deep breaths. Finally, he looked at Harry again. Passionately, he said, "If you so much as hint at this to a single person, I will make it my life's mission to see you dead."

Harry nodded solemnly. "I wouldn't have anyway, but I understand why you said that. And I want to apologize. I didn't know Veritaserum did that." Malfoy gave him a curt nod, but didn't respond.

After a short pause, Harry continued. "I need to know what was going through your mind when you had your wand pointed at Dumbledore, him talking to you."

Calming down, Malfoy thought, then answered. "It was like, the decision point. I had thought so much about killing him, it should be easy. I'd practiced the Killing Curse, on animals, and I was sure I could do it. But it suddenly seemed different, felt different. Maybe because it was Dumbledore, talking to me like he was. Part of me didn't want to do it, and part was trying to make me do it. I was scared, afraid of what the Dark Lord would do if he found out that I had the chance but didn't do it."

Interesting, thought Harry. But I want to know more about the part that stopped him. Was it just Dumbledore? "Was there some part of you that thought, I shouldn't do this because murder is wrong?"

Malfoy raised an eyebrow, as if it were an interesting question. "I'm not sure. I mean, obviously, I wasn't taught that murder was wrong, like that. I was taught that life is a battle, you know, us against them, and I already said the bit about showing no mercy. So I suppose that may seem obvious to you, but it wasn't part of my way of thinking. The reason I'm not sure is that it wasn't a conscious thought, but something inside me was pushing me not to do it, and not just because it was Dumbledore. At that time, I thought it was a weakness, and I tried to get past it. Over time, I started to realize that it was a conscience, one that had been suppressed most of my life. So I guess the answer to your question is yes, but not exactly in the way you put it. It was more of a feeling than a thought."

Harry felt he was on to something, the answers he was looking for. “How did this conscience change, or develop, over the year between then and now?”

Malfoy grunted. “Even with the Veritaserum, it’s hard to answer that. I guess I’d say it changed, got stronger, but mainly because for the first time in my life, I literally feared for my life, thought it might soon be over. That gave me a way of looking at other people that I hadn’t had before. At some point, I actually started to feel sorry for Dumbledore, sorry that he died. It was a strange feeling. The part of myself that my father trained told me that it was a weakness, brought on by my fear of death. But it didn’t feel like weakness. It felt like... like it was wrong. Even though I hadn’t been taught that, you pick it up from society. I was willing to consider the idea that my father had been wrong.

“As for now... I’m happy that the Dark Lord has gone, that that whole thing is over with. I’m happy not to be in that kind of position, to have to think about that, to have that hanging over me. I think I would feel bad if I killed someone, and I don’t want to do it. So, I guess you could say that my conscience is evolving.”

“How do you feel about your father now?”

Malfoy stared at the wall behind Harry. “I don’t know. I made fun of you for giving that answer about who you fancied, and here I am, giving it. On the one hand, he tried to help me succeed, to be powerful, as he understood it. But on the other hand, he led me down a path that I’d rather have no part of, and it failed in any case. To be honest, I’m just as happy that he’s on the run now. I don’t especially want to see him in Azkaban, but I don’t want to live with him either. I want to work some things out by myself, without his comments or influence. So, I’m not really sure.”

Harry was fairly sure at this point what he would say to the Wizengamot, but he still had a few more questions. “What do you plan to do in the future?”

Malfoy seemed to try to speak, paused, then tried again. “I don’t know. I have access to my family’s money—we took most of it out recently—so I don’t have to think too hard about it. I’m not sure about

this, either. It's funny—you said you would be asking this, and at the time I couldn't imagine why, but now of course I understand. I wanted to give a sarcastic answer, like, find out if the Dark Lord has a brother, go join up with him. I thought your question was stupid, because it's like you're checking to make sure I won't say that, even though what I've said should be enough to tell you that's not going to happen. I tried to say that, the sarcastic answer, but I found I couldn't. The Veritaserum doesn't even let you use sarcasm! Weird. How about you?"

To his own surprise, Harry laughed; Malfoy looked at him, puzzled. "I don't know either. I laughed because I've gotten all these job offers, but I have a strong feeling of not wanting to do anything, at least for a while. And I don't know why. Everybody thinks I should do this or that, and I can't explain to anybody why I don't want to do anything."

"That's something I can understand right now," agreed Malfoy. "Very different things happened to us, but they both changed our lives a lot, and maybe we need time to sort it all out. Did you—wait, let me check, have you asked everything you wanted to ask?"

Harry thought. "Nothing is coming to my mind right now, but I think there were one or two more things. So, go ahead. It'll probably come to me."

"Has everything you've said in public since beating him—to Gleason, at the ceremony—been the truth?"

"Yes, it has."

"Why did you walk out there to die, like a sheep? Why not fight, at least?"

Harry's eyes narrowed in puzzlement. "I thought I told you this. I was a Horcrux. The only way to make sure the person that made Horcruxes can die, and stay dead, is to destroy all the Horcruxes. I had to die." He shrugged, as if to say, what can you do?

"He was dead before," pointed out Malfoy. "He could have died again, and this time, you or everyone could have tried harder to make sure

he didn't come back. If you could get rid of all the other Horcruxes, and stop him from coming back until you died a natural death, wouldn't that be enough? He'd be dead, never to return."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," admitted Harry. "I don't know how that would have worked."

Malfoy again gave him the 'you're weird' look. "How long was it between your finding out you were a Horcrux, and walking into the forest?"

"Less than a half hour."

Malfoy shook his head in disbelief. "Next time you decide you need to go off and die, you might want to stop for a little while and think about it. I mean, I'm not you, but I would've clung to life with all my strength. I can't believe you did that so easily."

"You think that was easy? It was the hardest thing I ever did!"

"But not the one you thought the most about! Why were you so sure you had to do it?"

"Dumbledore told Snape about it, and Snape gave me his memories of it as he was dying. Snape was on our side all along. Dumbledore told him I needed to figure it out, and then die, so the Horcrux would be destroyed. If there was a way to do it and have me survive, I'm sure he would have made sure I did it that way. He cared about me."

"How can you say 'he cared about me' and 'he sent me off to die' in the same sentence? That sounds seriously stupid, and I'd guess, not only to me!"

"It was for the greater good," said Harry, aware of the irony but knowing Malfoy wouldn't be. "Maybe I could've survived for a while, but the next time he came back, he would've killed even more. Saving my own life could've killed hundreds."

"Could've is the key word," retorted Malfoy. "Life is a big gamble, you never know what's going to happen. What makes it your duty to lay down and die so maybe hundreds don't die in the future?"

"You couldn't understand."

"I think you're wrong," said Malfoy forcefully. "I know I was raised differently than you, and most people, but I think a lot more people would agree with me than you about this. This is just because there's something weird about you." He paused. "I don't know, ask Weasley, ask Granger. See what they think."

Harry was slightly unnerved; he hadn't thought about it in the way Malfoy had put it. He wouldn't accept it coming from Malfoy, but he did wonder what Ron and Hermione would think of it. "I will," he said.

Malfoy chuckled. "All these years, I thought there was something wrong with you. Now I still think that, but just for a different reason. You asked how I was raised, so I'm going to ask the same thing. How were you raised?"

Harry explained how it had been with the Dursleys, and why it had been necessary for him to live there, finishing with the recent discovery about Dudley. "Well, you obviously didn't learn your values from the people you grew up with," said Malfoy. "Interesting. Your aunt feels even worse about wizards than my family does about Muggles. Difference is, we're the ones with power. If she had any brains, she'd be happy her son's a wizard."

"Do you think we're superior to Muggles, and should rule them?"

"That's like my asking you if friends are good," replied Malfoy. "I was raised to think that. But putting that aside... the first one seems obvious. We are superior. It's just a fact. But as for ruling them... I don't know, maybe it would be more trouble than it's worth. This whole thing has made me question the whole notion of having power. I mean, obviously, having power is good, but maybe getting it by violence isn't such a good idea. There are other ways. Muggles would be jealous of us if they knew, so maybe it's better that they don't."

Not exactly evolved, thought Harry, but not as bad as it could be. Another question occurred to him. "Did your mother tell you why I wouldn't consider doing this for your father."

"Yes." Malfoy's expression didn't change.

"What was your reaction to that?"

"I wasn't surprised. I assumed it was because she was your girlfriend, but now it seems she's not, or at least, you don't know. So now, it seems a little strange. Did she ask you not to?" Harry told Malfoy what Ginny had said; Malfoy laughed. "Now, there's someone I can respect. Exactly what I'd say if I were her."

This didn't exactly make Harry happy, which Malfoy seemed to notice. "Oh, come on, Potter, don't hold it against her that I approve," he said, annoyed. "There's nothing wrong with a healthy grudge. It gives you energy, motivation, keeps you going. My grudge against you at Hogwarts made me try harder."

"At schoolwork?"

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "No, you idiot. That only matters to someone like Granger; it didn't even matter to you and Weasley, judging by the quality of your work. No, it made me try harder at gathering power, influence. But you weren't even trying to get influence, were you?" Harry shook his head. "After hearing the other stuff today, I'm not surprised. Before today, I thought you were trying, but were incompetent at it. I mean, the Boy Who Lived? Already famous, beat a ghost of the Dark Lord and a basilisk in the first two years? You could have been the king of the school if you'd given it half an effort. Incredible. You had every advantage, and you just didn't care." Malfoy shook his head in wonder, as if unable to conceive such stupidity.

"Well, let me say this, and I know that you won't take it seriously coming from me, but for what it's worth... even though you still didn't try, you have huge influence right now, all over this country. You need to get in the game. You need to cultivate that influence, use it, let it grow. If you don't, it's such an appalling waste that you should just

find another forest to go into so someone can kill you, for being too stupid to live.

"Influence is important, Potter, and not just for the reasons I was taught. Influence can promote your ideas. You want things to be a certain way, you can use influence to make them that way, or to push things in that direction. Whatever that way is. If you want to make house-elves equal to humans, like Granger wants to... stupid though that is... it can help you do that. People fight for influence, kill for it. I still want it, even if I won't kill for it. But it just walked up to you and sat in your lap. It would be criminal to kick it away."

Harry was impressed by Malfoy's monologue, and found it hard to write it off as being due to Veritaserum. He could see Malfoy's point, but still felt too afflicted by whatever had been bothering him since Voldemort died to give it serious thought; he decided to file it for future consideration. "I'll keep that in mind," he said.

Malfoy nodded. "About as much as could be expected."

Harry got back to the next question he'd been about to ask. "Do you still hold a grudge against me?"

Malfoy gave him a rueful grin, and shook his head. "It's served me well, but sad to say, I understand you too well for that now. You're like a genius in some ways, stupid in some, and normal in others. You have what some people call incredible bravery, or what I would call a lack of a self-preservation instinct. If everyone were like you, would the world be a great place, or would humanity have died out a long time ago? I'm still not sure. But in the end, you got rid of the Dark Lord, which was something I wanted at that point, but didn't dare hope to happen. So, I'm inclined to view you charitably. At this point, I find myself hoping that you'll wake up and smell the coffee; it would be interesting to see what you would do with your influence if you had half a mind to use it. I may be envious of it, but it helps to know that you didn't want it. I can still feel superior," he finished with a grin.

Harry chuckled. "And that's what's important."

“So, how about me?” asked Malfoy. “I’m guessing that you don’t have much of a grudge against me either, at this point.”

“No, I don’t. Like you said, I understand you much better now. You were born to a Death Eater, which puts you in such a different universe to me that I had no idea what to think, except that you were totally evil. Knowing how things seemed to you, and your background, make things seem a lot different.”

“So, now I’m only 95% evil,” joked Malfoy.

Harry laughed. “I wouldn’t want to give it a number. But I knew Dumbledore had hopes for you, he saw something in you beyond how you were raised. I suppose that...” Harry trailed off, looking confused.

Malfoy smiled, greatly amused. “The light dawns.”

“The Veritaserum’s worn off,” said Harry; Malfoy nodded. “You shouldn’t have been able to say you were 95% evil, since you weren’t serious. When did you notice it?”

“Just a minute ago, when you said about my feeling superior, that’s what’s important. I know you don’t really think that, so I realized it had worn off. I just decided I’d wait to see how long it took you to figure it out.”

“I guess I should expect that of you.”

“Yes, you should, Potter. Someone has to keep you on your toes. I couldn’t believe you almost grabbed that airplane. If Weasley has more wits than you, then you’ve got problems.”

Harry was mildly annoyed at the insult to Ron, but found he couldn’t really be angry at such a comment now. Pointing his wand at the door to Aberforth’s living quarters, he opened it, then responded. “Well, someone’ll have to watch out for me, until I wake up and smell the coffee. Or at least until I figure out what I want to do beyond just wake up the next morning.”

“Well, at least you want to wake up the next morning,” said Malfoy. “That’s something.” Ron walked through the door.

“Do I really deserve such low expectations?” asked Harry lightly.

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. “Until you start having higher ones of yourself, then yes.”

Harry nodded. “Hard to argue with that, I guess.” He extended a hand. “Take care, Malfoy.”

Malfoy shook it. “You too, Potter.” He glanced at Ron, paused for a second, then spoke in a tone that Harry realized from hearing Malfoy speak under Veritaserum as overly casual. “Sorry about the mead, Weasley. But drinking’s bad for you anyway.” He grinned at Ron’s surprised expression, nodded at Harry, and Disapparated.

Ron gaped at Harry. “What was that?”

Harry knew he would explain, but not just then. “We had a good conversation.”

“I guess so,” said Ron, no less surprised, but clearly realizing that answers wouldn’t be forthcoming. “I suppose you’re going to clear him.”

Harry nodded. “We understand each other a lot better.”

“He understands you? How?”

“I think he knows now that I don’t need Veritaserum to tell the truth,” Harry answered, as Aberforth walked into the room. “Can I have my bar back now?”

“Sorry, Ab. I really appreciate it.”

“It’s okay. While you’re here, there’s some junk I’d like you to take off my hands.” He levitated a box in from the living quarters; it was square, each side a little under a foot. Looking inside, Harry saw an assortment of peculiar-looking items, none of which he could

recognize, or understand its function. He looked up at Aberforth quizzically.

“Some odd items my brother wanted you to have,” said Aberforth. “Magical artifacts. I got this box last night; apparently, he had left it with someone with instructions to send it after Voldemort was dead.”

“But... that means he knew I wouldn’t die!”

“I suspected it, my dear boy,” said a voice, seeming to come from nowhere. “I hoped it might happen, and I could not be more pleased to have been correct.”

Ron looked as stunned as Harry felt. “Professor?” Harry asked, looking around.

“Oh, yeah,” said Aberforth gruffly, reaching behind the bar and pulling out a portrait. “That’s right, there’s one more piece of junk you can get rid of for me.”

“My dear brother, that was unnecessarily unkind.”

“Oh, stuff it, Albus. Better that you go to a place where you’ll be appreciated.”

“You mean... this is for me?” Harry asked Aberforth, not quite able to believe it.

“If you want it. Personally, I don’t see why—“

“Aberforth, please... Harry, please do not feel obliged to accept this.”

“Are you kidding? I’m thrilled! Aberforth, thank you so much.”

“I will, of course, be spending much of my time at Hogwarts, as is my primary duty,” said the portrait. “But I will be quite pleased to visit you from time to time.”

“Thank you, Professor. I’m really honored to have your portrait.”

“There is one thing, Harry: you must call me Albus. It is not considered appropriate to call a portrait by the resident’s former title.”

“Appropriate,” muttered Aberforth. “It’s not considered appropriate to cast charms on goats, either, even though it doesn’t hurt anyone, including the goats. But no, we must do what is appropriate.”

Ron was looking through the box, and pulled out a long, thin jewelry case. He opened it, and pulled out a necklace in the shape of an old-fashioned key, with a thin silver chain. “What’s this?”

Harry took it; as soon as Harry’s hand touched it, Dumbledore’s voice was heard, not from the portrait. “I am the key to understanding others,” it intoned.

Aberforth laughed. “Oh, that’s my brother, all right. After all, why explain something when you can leave mysterious hints? Speak in riddles, make sure everyone understands how clever you are.”

Dumbledore chose not to respond. “It is an artifact which translates what you say into any language,” he explained to Harry. “Even if there are multiple languages being spoken, what you say will be heard by each person in their native language.”

“That sounds really convenient,” said Harry. “Of course, I can’t imagine a situation where I would use it.”

“One never knows what the future will bring,” said Dumbledore. “You may well become a person of influence internationally, as you already are domestically. Such an item may be useful.”

Something clicked in Harry’s head when Dumbledore used the word ‘influence.’ “You were listening! You were behind the bar!”

Dumbledore grinned sheepishly. “Surely I cannot be blamed for where my brother leaves my portrait. I will say, Harry, that you handled the situation extremely well, better than I could have hoped. My compliments.”

“Thank you, Profess—sorry, I mean, thank you, Albus. But I was wondering, I thought things like the artifacts had to go through the Ministry’s screening.”

“The fact is, Harry, that the Ministry almost never screens,” explained Dumbledore. “I knew they would in my case, because Scrimgeour wanted to know what I had left you, and what it hinted at. But especially if one knows that one’s end is not far off, it is not difficult to circumvent the process. For a fee, a third party will hold the goods and follow instructions regarding their disposition.”

Makes sense, thought Harry. “Well, let’s get back home. Thanks again, Ab. See you later.” Harry and Ron Disapparated.

At Grimmauld Place, Harry decided to put the portrait of Dumbledore on the wall near the table where he read his mail. He sat there with Ron and talked about the conversation with Malfoy; Ron expressed frequent amazement and disbelief. At the end, Ron said, “Amazing. I never would have thought. But I’m really surprised that you didn’t get up and leave when he made you take the Veritaserum. Why didn’t you?”

“I realized,” Harry answered, speaking slowly, “that if I thought of it as something that I couldn’t tolerate, then it would be for him also, and I should consider that. Also, it was something he thought was so important that he would risk my reaction, even though it could kill his future. I realized it wasn’t a big deal, especially since I figured I wouldn’t be lying anyway. And it turned out well, since he was impressed enough that I didn’t retaliate against him for what he did that I knew that he was cooperating voluntarily, not just because of the Veritaserum. Even though he’d never have done what I did, and he’d think I was too easy on him, what I did ended up with a much better result. So, it’s an argument that my way isn’t as stupid as he thinks. After all, I got influence without trying, and in a way that he never could have done. If I was the type like him, who tried to get it, I never would have. If that makes any sense.”

“I can see that,” agreed Ron.

“Quite right, Harry,” added Dumbledore. “As I listened, I wondered whether you would make that particular point to him, but I gather you felt it was not necessary.”

“No, I just didn’t think of it until now, actually,” admitted Harry. He spent a while longer talking with them, after which Dumbledore returned to Hogwarts, and Ron to the Ministry. Harry sat alone, thinking about what Malfoy had said.

* * * * *

Harry went for another fly in the mid-afternoon, staying out for about an hour. Again, he encountered no dementors; he wondered what they were all doing, now that their targets were indoors or in Diagon Alley. Checking his mail on his arrival at home, he found a letter from Luna, a response to his response to her letter after the Merlin ceremony. She said that she was more popular these days, partly because of his mention of her in his speech.

“People know an image of you,” she wrote. “‘Harry Potter mentioned her, so she must be great.’ But they don’t know who I really am, and for many of them, they often forget that I’m the same person that they were making fun of for wearing a pirate’s hat last year. Now, if I wear a pirate’s hat, it’s cool. It’s very strange. It makes me feel like I understand, just a little, how you must feel. People think they know you, but they can’t. I know you, but even I can’t know what it feels like for you now.” Affected by her direct style and understanding of his state of mind, he took out a piece of parchment, and started writing.

Two hours later, he was finished. It was only three pages, but it had taken a long time because he had tried to explain how he was feeling, which he found quite difficult. “Maybe this doesn’t add up to much of anything,” he wrote in conclusion. “If it doesn’t, it’s because it doesn’t add up in my mind. I don’t know how I can be so unknown to myself. I should know myself, I should know why I’m feeling what I’m feeling. But I don’t. It’s very frustrating. I know, maybe I just need to give it time. But I’ve never been very patient. You seem like you would know yourself, like you would be patient. I envy that about you.”

An hour later, Ron came through the fireplace. "Hey. What have you been up to?"

Harry shrugged. "Correspondence. Reading. You know, the exciting life of the big celebrity, the national hero."

Ron chuckled. "Well, if the country needs someone to heroically sit around all day, you're the man. I'm here mainly to ask if you want to come for dinner tonight."

Shaking his head, Harry replied, "Not really in the mood tonight."

"You mean, not in the mood to face Mum."

"I don't know. Maybe." The thought immediately occurred to Harry that this was an answer he couldn't have given under Veritaserum.

Obviously not fooled, Ron sat on the sofa and looked at Harry. "I can understand that. I live there, and sometimes I'm not in the mood for Mum. She can be a bit much. But she usually lays off after there's been a bit of a row, gives things a chance to cool down. If you stay away, she'll know why, and it'll be that much harder later on." He paused. "Besides, Dudley will be there, so it's probably better if you are. He's become her latest project."

Knowing Molly, it didn't surprise Harry. "Have you talked to him much?"

"A bit, though of course I haven't been there that much. I got the impression that he'd like to talk to you more. I mean, Mum's been giving him the introduction to the wizarding world, but I think he'd prefer that you did it, because he knows you, and Mum can be, you know... I tried to explain to Dudley that we'd been through a lot in the past year, especially you, and that you needed some time to be pretty isolated. He seemed to understand."

"Thanks," said Harry.

“Probably what he saw in Diagon Alley made him understand a lot better than anything I said,” suggested Ron. “So, who were you writing to?”

“I wrote back to Luna.” To Ron’s slightly raised eyebrows, he added, “She wrote after the ceremony, I wrote back to say thanks, she wrote again... I don’t know if it’s going to be a correspondence or not, but it’s very... comfortable. Maybe it’s what makes her seem strange to most people, but it’s like, she’s able to get past the surface stuff. She seems to really understand how I feel. I mean, you and Hermione do, and like I said, that’s why I’m comfortable talking to you. But she didn’t spend the time with me that you guys did, but she still seems to understand. I was pretty surprised.”

Ron nodded. “I can see that. But I hope she doesn’t tell Ginny that she’s writing to you. Ginny would wonder why you aren’t writing to her.”

Harry could tell by looking at Ron that he was looking out for Ginny, but would never admit it, and wouldn’t press Harry about it. He shrugged. “I only wrote her because she wrote me; Ginny didn’t. I’m writing Neville too. He’s telling me about what’s going on at Hogwarts, and I’m telling him about the exciting life at Grimmauld Place.

“I also wrote to the Wizengamot, told them that I was ready to give testimony about Malfoy.” He paused, thinking. “So, do you think I should make an effort to use my influence?”

Ron gave him a small smile. “These days, I try to avoid using the word ‘should’ when I talk to you.”

“I appreciate that,” said Harry with a laugh. “But, really.”

“I’ve heard stuff from Dad about how that works, and I think you’re better off staying away from it,” said Ron. “I mean, I’ve only been at the Ministry for a week, unofficial, and I’ve already heard stuff. People spend their whole careers trying to get influence, and they may get high positions, but I don’t think they’re any happier. I don’t really know how you’d go about increasing your influence, and as for using it, I

think you will when something comes along that you care about. Until then, I wouldn't worry about it."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I don't really know what I would do anyway. So, how's it going with the Muggle-borns?"

"We're doing what we can, but we're still short of materials. Another problem is that a lot of them lost their jobs because of their blood status, and they were replaced by half- or pure-bloods. Now, it isn't so easy for them to get their jobs back, and there's not much we can do."

"I guess loans aren't going to help too much, if people can't get jobs," said Harry sadly. "Voldemort certainly did a lot of damage."

"Yeah, but like Hermione said in her Merlin speech, it was only because this prejudice exists in the first place. He couldn't exploit it otherwise. And I think even you, using all your influence, couldn't get rid of it." Harry nodded, looking absently across the room.

"Well, I should be getting back," said Ron. "I can't do much to help them, but I can talk to them, and tell Dad what they're saying. See you at dinner?" Harry nodded his acknowledgment, and Ron left.

He killed time for the rest of the afternoon by picking up and looking at the various artifacts left him by Dumbledore; each one gave a one-sentence hint as to its function when he touched it. He knew he could find the answers to all of them by asking Dumbledore's portrait, but he preferred to try to find out by himself. A little challenge, not important, but something to keep him occupied.

At six o'clock, he went through the fireplace to the Burrow, and saw Hermione sitting by herself in the living room. "How's it going?" he asked.

"My parents went back to Australia," she said glumly.

Harry again fought back his reflex to assume responsibility. "I'm really sorry. Did you talk with them again before they left?"

She nodded, looking down, and every now and then, up at him. "They've been seeing a magical psychologist, one who specializes in memory issues, usually brought on by aggressive or unstable Memory Charms. I talked to her, and while she wouldn't tell me details of what they said, she did say she tried to explain in some detail why I found it necessary to do what I did, which I appreciated. My parents just said that while they understand it a little better, they need more time, and maybe some more work dealing with their memories. They do allow for the possibility that we can have some relationship in the future."

"Well, I guess that's something," said Harry, looking hard to find a silver lining in a very dark cloud.

"Yes, but... it's the way they said it. This is the worst part, Harry. When they talk to me... their faces, their tone... it's as if they're talking to a stranger. That hurts so much. I understand why; I made them forget they had a daughter, so in some ways, I will seem like a stranger. But I'm their daughter..." She fought back tears, Harry looking away uncomfortably. "Sorry. Anyway, it was hard. All I can do now is pray that things go well, and they remember enough of their old life to include me in it."

Harry nodded, and there was a short silence as Harry tried to think of something else to say. "How's it going at the Ministry?"

"Oh, pretty well. Arthur's very happy with what I've done, said it's saved him hours of difficulty, and allowed him to focus on actually doing things. It's really almost frightening, the amount of paperwork there is in any bureaucracy."

She talked about the Wizarding Unity Department for the next five minutes as he listened politely, moderately interested. She had just finished a story when Ron and Dudley came down the stairs.

"...and it ended up in his mouth!"

"His mouth? Does that still count?"

“Oh, yes,” said Ron, nodding vigorously. “Doesn’t matter how you catch it, as long as you catch it.” They sat on the sofa near Hermione; Harry was in a chair.

“But you can’t use magic.” Ron nodded again.

“Unfortunately,” said Harry, “any story that ends, ‘and it ended up in his mouth,’ I’m pretty sure I know the beginning of. You explained Quidditch, I see.” Hermione moaned and rolled her eyes.

“Sure,” said Ron, ignoring Hermione’s reaction. “It’s our biggest sport—“

“Isn’t it our only sport?” put in Hermione.

“Of course not! Didn’t you research sports? You’ve looked up everything else in the library.”

“Well, nobody assigned me to write an essay on the history of wizarding sports. But I’m sure you’ll fill this terrible gap in my knowledge,” she said, with heavy sarcasm in the latter sentence.

“If you insist,” responded Ron, as if oblivious to the sarcasm. “But not right now, dinner’s almost ready.” Hermione got up to help Molly set the table; Ron followed, talking about sports.

Dudley grinned at Harry. “It’s hard to believe that they’re a couple. Are they always like that with each other?”

“Usually,” said Harry. “Sometimes it’s funny, sometimes it’s annoying. But yeah, they were always at each other about something. I got along with both fine, though. The main thing she’d criticize me about was schoolwork. I didn’t care, and that really annoyed her. Ron didn’t care either, though, so she’d be annoyed at both of us. Then she’d be really annoyed when we came to her asking for help with an essay due the next day.”

Dudley laughed. “I can imagine. I didn’t have any smart friends, so I usually got really bad grades.” He paused. “Not that it matters now, of course. It’s so funny, your life gets turned upside down...”

“Mine did too,” agreed Harry. “Just at a younger age. And what’s worse, everyone knew who I was.”

“Yeah. I found out today that I’ll be hearing the phrase ‘Harry Potter’s cousin’ quite a lot.” Responding to Harry’s quizzical look, Dudley said, “Didn’t you know there was a thing about it in that newspaper? Some social column—no, some article on the downtown area opening up after being closed. Hey, that reminds me, you never told me that it was the first day it opened after it was dangerous because of dementors,” he added accusingly.

They got up as Molly called everyone to the table. “Well, it wasn’t dangerous then. And I just didn’t want to worry you.” Harry nodded to Bill and Fleur, who Harry hadn’t known were coming.

“Uh-huh,” Dudley replied dubiously as they sat. “But that reminds me, why don’t they just go nuts and attack the non-magical population?”

Harry shrugged, but as usual, Hermione had the answer. “They only attack people with magical ability, apparently. Somehow the soul-sucking doesn’t work with Muggles. Otherwise, they’d know about them, of course.”

“But... Dudley was attacked three years ago,” pointed out Harry. “If people knew that, wouldn’t they have known he was a wizard?”

“No, all it takes is a very small amount of magical ability. Some people had their souls sucked who were thought to be Squibs, but had just enough ability to be vulnerable to it. Since Dudley is your cousin, people would have thought he had a small amount, but only very small, since he wasn’t invited to Hogwarts. Or so they thought.”

“Interesting... Petunia didn’t get the letter... does magical ability skip generations?”

“Oh, yes,” said Hermione, sipping her soup. “Like any other genetic characteristic, it can be dormant for generations. Though to be honest, I don’t know if it’s genetic exactly. It would be sooo interesting if they

could do DNA testing for it, isolate the gene... I wonder if it's dominant or recessive, or if it even works that way..."

"Yes, this is the kind of thing that gets Hermione worked up," grinned Ron.

"Anyway, Dudley," said Harry, "you were saying there was something about you in the Prophet? I didn't see that."

"It was in the article about Diagon Alley reopening, near the end," said Molly. "It said that you were seen showing your cousin Dudley around, so they know his first name. I took him to the Social Services department, talked to a few people. When I introduced him, most of them said, 'oh, yes, Harry Potter's cousin.'"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Aren't you honored, Dudley, to be my cousin?"

"Apparently, I'm supposed to be," agreed Dudley.

"Oh, Harry, you need to show Dudley your place, he can't go there now because of the Fidelius Charm," said Molly, looking at Harry significantly.

Harry struggled to keep any expression off his face. It wasn't something he wanted to do, and here she was again, interfering in what should be his private life and decisions. He quickly turned to Bill. "Bill, how's the planning going?"

"Pretty well," said Bill, seemingly surprised by the quick change of subject. "I wanted to tell you, though, I talked to Kingsley today, he came by earlier. He leaned on me a bit to announce the bank sooner than I'd intended. Politics is part of it, but he also pointed out that we might not be the only ones with this idea; someone else could beat us to the punch. It's a good point; the goblins are alienating people so much that it wouldn't take a genius to see a good business opportunity. If they did, we could look like followers, not leaders, and the bank might not get the early publicity benefit that I think we will. So, I talked to Gleason a few hours ago."

Again, Harry was annoyed, and tried to hide it. “Why didn’t you ask me first?”

“Don’t worry, Harry, the article’s embargoed.” To Harry’s blank look, he explained, “It’s a media term, it means that it won’t be reported until I give final permission. I anticipated your approval, but I did this just to make sure. You don’t have any problem with it, do you?”

“No, I guess not. Is there something I have to do?”

“Yes,” Bill said hesitantly, “and you may not like it, but I really do think it’s necessary. I’d like him to come over and see the vault for himself, which would mean inviting him, to get past the Fidelius Charm.”

Harry took a breath, again trying to control his emotions. “You’re right, I don’t like it. I really don’t want the number of people who can just pop into Grimmauld Place to be any higher than it is right now.”

“I know, and I understand that,” said Bill. “But it’s one thing for us to say, we have three million Galleons, and that’s the security on which the bank rests. And if you said it personally, most people would believe it. But it’s very much another for a veteran Prophet economic reporter to see it with his own eyes, and write an article to that effect. Our credibility would be instantly established, and it would be high. And not much matters to a bank more than its credibility.”

Harry could see the point, but was still very unhappy. “And then, he can just waltz over to my place whenever he wants.”

Bill started to talk at the same time as Arthur, to whom he deferred. “Harry, you didn’t grow up in a wizarding home, so you may not know very clearly how fireplaces work,” said Arthur. “First of all, it’s considered very rude to visit someone’s home by fireplace without notice when you don’t have a relationship with them in which it’s very clear that it’s all right to do that. I don’t have to know Gleason personally to know that he’d never do that.

“Secondly, the kind of situation you’re talking about is what’s called an ‘open fireplace,’ where anyone can come, and it’s very rare. Only businesses have them, and then, only during business hours. You

can tell your fireplace not to let anyone through at specific times, or certain people at certain times. Usually, only family members and close, trusted friends have unrestricted access. Yours is set for unrestricted access mainly because it was the headquarters for the Order, and everyone was trusted. You could let Gleason through once, and set it never to allow him again if you wanted to. Nobody would use fireplaces if anybody could just go through anytime. It just wouldn't be safe."

There was silence for a moment as everyone ate; it seemed to Harry as if nobody was starting other topics of conversation until he'd replied to this one. He still felt resistance to the idea, but now understood there was no logical reason for it. Maybe I just feel safe there, he thought, and more people knowing makes it less safe. "Well, it was never explained to me like this," he allowed. "I suppose I can live with it. But I still don't want to do it any more than I have to."

"You shouldn't have to," responded Bill. "After we're done, I'll pop over to the Prophet and get him. The whole thing shouldn't take long. He's on deadline, so he won't make it any longer than he has to."

"Oh, Bill," said Ron, "I just remembered, some of the Muggle-borns I've been talking to have asked about the Gringotts thing, since some of them have money in there that would really be helpful right now. They don't understand why the goblins have taken such a hard line, and continue doing it, even when public opinion is so strongly against them; they're obviously not getting anywhere. Can you think of any reason?"

Bill shook his head regretfully. "Even among those of us who know goblins reasonably well, there's a strong sense of surprise. Gleason knows them, and we talked about it earlier, but couldn't come up with anything more than speculation, that some very hard-line goblins have gotten influence in the goblin world. In any society, there will always be people who insist that a hard line is the best way to secure benefits for their people, or pride. Then when that attitude provokes conflict, they use that conflict to enhance their own power, saying that they're strong, and only they can keep people safe, look out for them, and that anyone who doesn't agree with them isn't loyal. Goblin or human, usually that keeps hard-liners in power for a while."

Ron raised his eyebrows. "Well, that's going to be a little hard to explain to people at the Ministry, but I'll do my best. How did you know all that?"

Hermione scoffed. "Paying attention in History of Magic will do it."

"Sorry, Hermione, but I didn't either," grinned Bill. "It was my own reading after joining Gringotts. I've learned that with a very few exceptions—such as yourself—you learn much better when you read for yourself than when you do it for school."

"That pattern is all over history," put in Arthur. "It's practically a formula. But so many people don't pay close attention to history that the formula keeps working, it's not seen for what it is."

"But Kingsley's not a hard-liner," protested Molly.

"About this, he's acting a bit like one," said Arthur. "But I understand your point. Usually, it's the leader pushing the people's buttons, manipulating their emotions to justify his actions. Here, it's almost the other way around—Kingsley is practically forced by politics to do what he's doing. What makes the situation so incendiary is Harry." He glanced at Harry, an unspoken apology for what he felt he had to say. "Not Harry personally, of course, but as a symbol. To the wizarding community, he's a hero, the kind who comes along once in a century. To the goblins, he's an unrepentant criminal. I'm no expert, but I don't see how we can bridge that gap."

Ron looked annoyed. "As one of the people who rode out of there on that dragon, I don't see how any thinking person—all right, being—can say anything other than, it was necessary. Saying it was an insult, that Harry or we should apologize, or moaning about how much money it cost is just deliberately looking at only one side of an issue, not even trying to be fair. I don't see why I should waste my time trying to be fair to them, when they'd obviously prefer that we were still living under Voldemort, which we would if we hadn't taken the dragon."

“And no reasonable human would argue with what Ron just said,” agreed Bill, “which is why what you did is such a flashpoint, seen so differently by the two sides. By any human definition, the goblins are not reasonable—the baby and the Knut. I’ve heard the goblins compared to abused dogs. You hit a dog, kick it, punish it for no reason, and pretty soon it becomes continually defensive and aggressive, because you’ve conditioned it to do so. Some people say it’s useful to look at goblins that way.”

“Well, Bill,” said Hermione, “I know what humans have done to goblins in the past, and it’s pretty bad, but it’s been a hundred years since anything like that happened. Wouldn’t a new generation be able to let go of old hatred?”

“You’d think,” Bill agreed. “But goblins can live a long time; their average lifespan is a hundred and ten years, and a few can reach a hundred and fifty.” Hermione’s eyebrows went up. “I’m surprised you missed that in your reading,” he gently teased her. “So, there are no doubt living goblins, in positions of power in their community, who have vivid memories of human mistreatment. Shorter-lived humans, who inflicted the mistreatment, have mostly forgotten. Longer-lived goblins, who suffered it, remember very well. Strict adherence to the law is their protection when dealing with us. Kingsley’s pardon of you, while virtually a political necessity, was very inflammatory to them; it suggested that the rules had suddenly changed, that we were abrogating a long-held understanding. So, their attempted kidnapping of Harry is, I’d imagine, seen by them as an attempt to enforce justice when we haven’t.”

“If you were Minister,” asked Hermione, “what would you do?”

Bill’s discouraged expression suggested that there was no easy answer. “Ideally, I’d negotiate with them, offer a public expression of regret, work out some settlement involving gold and a new dragon, maybe pay for the repairs to Gringotts. Rationally, it would be the best result. But any Minister who did that would be removed from office very quickly; people wouldn’t stand for it.”

“Speaking of which,” asked Ron, “how do Ministers get removed from office, and appointed?”

Hermione gave him an impatient look. "Honestly, Ron, why should they even bother having History of Magic classes?"

"I've wondered that myself," Ron replied with a falsely casual air.

"Don't you remember reading about the Council of Elders?"

"Oh, yeah, a bunch of portraits, right?"

"A bunch of portraits," she muttered disdainfully. "What an understanding of our government. Our Minister is chosen by 'a bunch of portraits.'"

It appeared to Harry that Ron might be getting genuinely angry, not just engaging in their usual bantering argument, so he decided to help Ron. "I don't know any more than Ron does," he volunteered.

"I think I helped you two with a few too many essays," she sighed. "Probably you knew you didn't have to study much because I'd always help you out." Glancing over at Dudley, Harry saw him smiling; he supposed Dudley found the whole thing funny because it didn't involve him.

To Harry's surprise, Bill was smiling a little as well. "If only people knew, the three heroes of the moment were sitting around bickering about homework. Well, Harry and Ron, and Dudley, since you couldn't know... the Council of Elders is a group of five portraits, each of whom is considered to be the greatest political leader of his century, going back the last five centuries. They keep informed on politics, and they choose the person as Minister who they think is best suited at that time. Now, that person doesn't automatically become Minister; you can refuse, as Dumbledore did seventeen years ago. But hardly anyone ever refuses. For example, they shoved out Fudge and put in Scrimgeour when it was clear that Voldemort had returned, because they felt he was better suited for the situation. They can gauge popular support, and political standing."

"Strange system," said Dudley. "Of course, everything about the magical world seems strange to me." After a slight pause, he looked

at Harry. "Um, Harry... there's something I wondered if you'd help me with."

Harry wondered if it had to do with letting him visit Grimmauld Place; he wasn't thrilled with the idea, but supposed there was no way out of it if Dudley asked directly. "Mmm-hmmm?"

"I wondered if you'd go with me to my parents' house, and join me while I talk to them."

Harry was so dumbfounded that he literally thought he'd misheard. "What??"

"I'd like you to be in the room when I talk to them."

Now that he was sure, he still couldn't believe it. "Dudley, you must be joking. I'm, like, their least favorite person in the world. What could I possibly do except make the situation much, much worse?"

"Harry, he's asking you something that's important to him—" began Molly. Unable to help himself, Harry shot her an angry look. She stopped her sentence and glanced away; Harry turned his attention back to Dudley.

Dudley was more assertive than Harry had seen him since retrieving him from the Muggle world. "Harry, I don't care that they don't like you. I'm not asking you to be polite to them. It's just that... they're my parents, and I don't want to give up on them. I want to have contact with them, or at least, not say goodbye to them forever. So, I have to talk to them at some point. I have no idea what Mum is going to say, how she'll react. Like you said, she's in denial, and I'm afraid if I go there alone, she'll stay in denial, and try to drag me with her. I want you there because you'd be a reminder that she can't deny it. You're living proof that I'm a wizard. She'd have no choice but to accept what I am."

Harry could see Dudley's point, but was still staggered. "But, why me?" he asked plaintively. "Why not..." He trailed off, as a candidate didn't leap to mind.

“Molly offered,” said Dudley, his tone one of appreciation. “I thought about it, but it wouldn’t work. Mum would just shut down around a stranger. I think she’d just refuse to say anything while Molly was there. But Mum knows you, and you know her. If she said something that wasn’t true, you’d know it. You know the situation in our house; Molly doesn’t. You’d be much better.”

Harry took a deep breath, and looked down. A part of him refused to accept the idea. “I don’t know if I can do that, Dudley...”

Dudley was becoming impatient, and a little angry. With obvious reluctance, he said, “Look, Harry, I’m sorry about how I was with you when we were kids. I really am. But this—”

“This has nothing to do with that!” Harry shot back, emotion rising. “I can...” He took another breath, trying to calm down, as he saw concerned looks from the others around the table. He found himself wishing he could have had this conversation privately, but the Burrow was too small to be very private anyway. “I can forgive you for that, and I do.” He met Dudley’s eyes to emphasize the point. “You were just a kid, and they trained you to be like that. They treated me like that, so why shouldn’t you? But them, I can’t forgive, not that they’d ask anyway, or apologize. They’re adults, they should have known better. Being around them, having them say the kind of things to me that I know they’ll say... is something I really, really don’t want to do. I’d think you could understand that.”

There was silence; others, especially Bill and Arthur, looked uncomfortable, as if they were intruding on something that wasn’t their business. Dudley looked somewhat chastened. “I... I thought it didn’t bother you.”

“I tried not to let it,” said Harry quietly. “But day in, day out, all those years... I think I’d be the one in denial if I said it didn’t bother me. I think I was happy to find out I was a wizard, because it meant they’d be scared of me.” A thought came to his mind, and he let out a wry, bitter chuckle. “If you punish a dog, for no reason...”

Dudley nodded. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think of that.”

“No reason you should,” Harry shrugged. A few seconds of silence crawled by. “Look, I’ll... I’ll think about it. That’s all I can say right now.”

Again, Dudley nodded. “Thanks.”

Fleur spoke indignantly. “I am sure that what you say is true, Harry, but it is unbelievable to me that a person like you was treated in such a way. You deserved so much better.”

He glanced up at her with a slight nod, thanking her for the thought. “Well, it’s the sort of thing I hope to put behind me. Anyway, Bill, you can go ahead and call Gleason, we’ll do the thing.” Bill nodded, and conversation returned to topics like the Ministry. I wish that didn’t bother me, thought Harry as the others talked.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 8, Bank of the Phoenix: Harry goes to the Dursley home to help Dudley, then to the Wizengamot to give testimony about Malfoy.

From Chapter 8: Dear Harry, thank you so much for your interesting letter. I feel as though I suddenly got to know you a lot better than I had before. You’re kind of well known for not talking about yourself much, so I was very complimented that you told me what you did.

Harry chuckled as he read. Still as direct as ever, he thought. I didn’t know I was well known for that, but I suppose it makes sense, when everyone’s been digging into your life since you were eleven.

Chapter 8

Bank of the Phoenix

“Amazing... just amazing...” breathed Gleason, gazing into the vault in the wall of Grimmer Place.

“Feel free to take a closer look, open one of them up,” offered Bill. “I did, and I could still barely believe it.”

Gleason did, and looked no less impressed after he had done so. He looked at Harry curiously. “And you really had no plans for, or designs on, this money?”

“I already had seventy-five to a hundred thousand, according to the goblins, anyway,” pointed out Harry. “That’s more than enough for a lifetime, even if I never worked. There was just no way I was ever going to use it. I could’ve just let it sit there in the wall, but this seemed like a good use for it.”

“Most people would build a mansion, acquire artwork, and so forth,” said Gleason.

“I guess I just associate that kind of thing with families like the Malfoys,” said Harry. This part of the conversation was off the record, so Harry felt free to say what he pleased.

“Not everyone who uses money in such a way is, shall we say, morally questionable,” opined Gleason.

“I’d use the word ‘evil’ myself, but whatever you say,” said Harry lightly.

“So, David,” said Bill, “how do you think the goblins will react?”

Gleason’s expression suggested the words, ‘who knows?’ “I would say that almost nobody can predict the goblins’ actions at this point, as our friend Mr. Kassant discovered. If one were gambling, one would likely not go wrong by predicting the strongest possible reaction. I don’t think they’ll kill, but further kidnap attempts are far

from out of the question. I'd strongly suggest, Bill, that you take your security very seriously, and behave as if constantly under threat."

Bill nodded. "My wife's already made sure of that," he said wryly. "But I understand very well that they aren't going to be happy with me, or the others working with me. My whole family, in fact, really has to be careful, and they know that. But I really don't think they'll do that, because if they do, it's all-out war; Kingsley said as much today. Not for print," he reminded Gleason in an aside.

"I believe that is not a secret, but I understand," said Gleason. "From the Minister's mouth is another thing entirely."

"What would happen if there was an all-out war?" wondered Harry. "Would it be, like, a battle, like at Hogwarts?"

Bill shook his head. "They're not fighters, at least not like that. Person to person, they can fight, but on a large scale, humans with wands will beat them, which is why they've suffered so much over the centuries. They'd fight by stealth, hiring mercenaries, doing strategic damage, using heavily guarded Gringotts as their base of operations. Our response would be to basically besiege Gringotts. A magical field would be put up around Gringotts that would disallow anyone entering or leaving, by Apparition, Portkey, or whatever. That would take at least a month, maybe more. Gringotts would then be stormed by Aurors, of course being careful to avoid booby traps, and the like. There's not that much doubt about how it would come out; the main question would be how much damage the goblins could inflict during that time."

"Why would it take a month to do the spells?" asked Harry.

"It would be very complex, and have to cover a wide area," explained Bill. "It would not be dissimilar to the magic that protects Hogwarts, except it would be for offensive rather than defensive purposes. There's a whole branch of magic, which isn't taught at Hogwarts because it's highly specialized, that deals with situations like this. But it's well known, and predictable, how this would turn out. It's like a chess position in that it can be, and has been, exhaustively analyzed."

“Harry,” said Gleason, “getting back to the bank for a minute, if I could ask you a few questions for the record...” Harry nodded his assent. “What gave you the idea for this bank?”

Harry paused to remember. “Ron asked why there wasn’t a wizards’ bank, and it just popped into my head. I realized there was someone at the table who could actually do it, and I just thought, why not?”

“Was this prompted by the goblins’ recent change in attitude?”

Harry found he had to think about it. “I suppose so. I mean, I probably wouldn’t have suggested it if that hadn’t happened. There would have been no reason. But it all fit perfectly. Here was Bill, out of a job for no good reason, three million Galleons sitting in my home doing nothing, and a society with no banking alternative but one that was getting very aggressive. Let’s put it this way, it probably wouldn’t have happened if Bill hadn’t had to quit.”

“What are your expectations for the bank?”

Surprised by the question, Harry’s mind was a blank for a few seconds. “I want it to do good,” he replied. “I want the wizarding world to be a better place with it than without it.”

“Not to earn a profit?”

Harry shrugged. “Bill tells me it has to, so I don’t object to that.” He saw Bill stifle a laugh. “But I’m not a businessman, I’m just not interested in that. That’s not why I started this.”

“Forgive me, but your stated reason sounds rather idealistic.”

Harry was surprised at the tone of the question. “Is that a bad thing?”

Now Gleason seemed caught off guard. “It’s... highly unusual, in business.”

“Well, Ron likes to say I’m a highly unusual person,” joked Harry. “Except he doesn’t always mean it as a compliment. But... I don’t know what else to say. I just answered your question as best I could.”

“I understand, Harry. One last thing: what do you see as your role in this bank?”

“To provide the money, and stand out of the way. Well, that’s kind of a joke, and kind of true. For the business, out of the way. About what kind of things the bank does, I’ll tell Bill that I’d hope to see this or that, but then it’s up to him. He’s the one who knows what he’s doing.”

“Thank you, Harry.” Gleason put away his notebook. To Bill, he added, “You’re only starting with two staff? Especially with the situation as it is now, demand for your services may be higher than you can accommodate.”

“I may need to revise my projections,” Bill agreed. “I’m going to talk to Dad, see if I can steal Hermione from him for a while. Apparently she’s a whiz at organization, and that’s useful. But I’m not going to do more than I can handle.”

Gleason nodded. “Oh, you said you would have a mission statement for me?”

“Yes, but first... Harry, had you thought of a name for the bank?”

Harry blinked in surprise. “No, sorry. I know you mentioned that, but I completely forgot. Did you think of one?”

“I did. If you think it’s okay, I think a good name would be ‘Bank of the Phoenix.’”

Harry found himself smiling. “I like that.”

“I thought you might,” said Bill, taking out a folded piece of parchment and handing it to Gleason, who started reading. “I like the fact that it subtly reminds people that those who started the bank were in the Order, trying to put society right.”

Gleason's eyebrows rose high. "Are you serious, Bill?"

"What?" asked Harry. Gleason wordlessly handed him the statement. He silently read: "The Bank of the Phoenix is a bank by wizards, for wizards. Our purpose is to provide deposit, lending, and other business services to the members of the wizarding community, and in so doing, bring the community together. Our objectives are to help wizards improve their lives, provide efficient service at reasonable cost, and earn a profit. We strongly feel that these objectives are totally compatible, and that one should never be elevated above the other two. So that we never forget whom we serve, we pledge to, in perpetuity, distribute fairly half of any profit earned by the Bank to those with whom we do business, in the form of higher returns for depositors, lower loan repayment, or other widely distributed benefit to be announced by the Bank at the end of the fiscal year."

"What do you think?" asked Bill.

"It's very good," said Harry. "But I'm not crazy about the first sentence. It sounds too much like a slap at the goblins."

"I thought you might say that," said Bill. "But this is thinking about the future, forty or fifty years from now. It still makes sense, and it won't be viewed the same way at that time. And it makes the point that we have the interests of the wizard community at heart." Harry nodded reluctantly, still not very happy, but not wanting to make a further issue of it.

"Harry," said Gleason, "what did you think about the last part? About distributing half the profit?"

"Oh, yeah, that was a good idea," said Harry, suddenly enthusiastic. "I'm impressed that you thought of it," he added, to Bill. "After all that about how we needed to make a profit."

"Well, we do," said Bill, with a small smile. "I just didn't say what we'd do with it." To Gleason, he said, "Yes, I am serious, and not just because I knew Harry would be keen on it. I think it makes business sense. You might say this will discourage capital investors..." Gleason nodded. "But we have capital, so that's not so important."

Even so, I think capital will come anyway. But I think it's good for business because people will see what the point of the bank is, that it's about helping them as much as it is about profit. That will encourage more business, give people confidence that we're not just out to make as much money for ourselves as possible—which, ironically, will lead to bigger profit, justifying capital investment. But I want it to be a bank that people can feel good about." With a wicked grin at Harry, he added, "And I want it to be a bank that Harry can feel good about, which is an even bigger challenge."

"Very funny," Harry retorted, trying not to smile.

Gleason turned to Harry. "Are you concerned, Harry, that the profit-sharing scheme could hinder capital investment?"

Harry looked at Gleason blankly. "I'm sorry, but I didn't understand a word you just said."

"I'm sorry. I'm talking about the idea that sharing the profits, as Bill just talked about, might discourage people from investing money in the business." Harry was silent; Gleason kept trying. "Because some of the profit they would have made will go to customers instead."

Embarrassed because he felt as though he was expected to understand but still didn't, Harry shook his head. "I think Harry doesn't know about the concept of capital investment," said Bill. "I'll explain it to him in more detail later, but I'm pretty sure that if he understood your question, he'd say it didn't bother him, and that he trusts me to do what I think is best."

"Well, I can say that without understanding the question," said Harry.

Gleason grinned. "I suppose your lack of knowledge can be excused, given your age, and that you spent the last year trying to find a way to get rid of..." He paused, and uncomfortably finished, "Voldemort."

Harry smiled, appreciating the effort. "Thank you."

Gleason gave him a mild shrug. "Your attitude about this is understandable, considering that you actually fought him, something

that most of us would have trembled at the mere prospect of. Well, Bill, Harry, I must be getting back to work on this. It'll be close, but I think the Prophet will hold the presses, as they say, for this story. Thank you both for your cooperation, and Harry, for allowing me here." With a nod, Gleason left through the fireplace.

Bill gave Harry a humorously superior look. "So, would you like me to explain about capital investment?"

"Maybe some other time," said Harry. "But I was wondering, instead of giving back profit, why not just charge lower prices, and make less profit?"

"Well, it's partly symbolic," Bill explained, "and partly that it gives us more leeway. Your way, if we have a bad year, we might lose money. This way, we still make money, just less. We give back the money if we have it, and if we don't, we don't."

Harry nodded. "I may not know about business, but I did understand that." They talked for a little longer, and Bill returned home.

* * * * *

That night in bed, Harry thought again about the problem with Molly. It's like she just can't stop herself, he thought in frustration. In the end, he had reluctantly let Dudley in on the house's location, taking the opportunity to do it at the same time as he did it for Gleason. He hoped that the explanation given at dinner regarding not abusing the privilege of using someone's fireplace would discourage Dudley from visiting too much.

But, he thought, I shouldn't have been put in that position at all. It's my decision who I open my house to, not hers. I don't want to stop going over there, but I may have to. Ron said I shouldn't stay away, but if I'm going to get that angry at her, maybe staying away is better. There's no way she won't know the reason, anyway.

He thought about Dudley's request, and to his relief he found that the more he did, the less it bothered him. He reflexively felt that he wanted to be around Vernon and Petunia as little as possible, and still

felt that way in general, but realized that for the visit Dudley described, things would be very different, as they had the last time he'd seen them. In the past, Harry had always been more or less at their mercy, depending on the goodwill of people who strongly disliked him. Now, he needed them for nothing, and could say what he pleased; there was nothing they could do to him. Satisfied with this thought, he soon drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

After another morning visit from Fred, Harry went downstairs to have breakfast, finding his copy of the Prophet on the table as usual. The headline read, "Harry Potter, Bill Weasley To Start Wizards' Bank," with the sub-headline "Potter's Inheritance, Assets of 3,000,000 Galleons." He read Gleason's article, which seemed to him to be overly generous, painting Harry as highly altruistic. Turning to the editorials, he found two on the topic. One urged wizards in the strongest terms to abandon any dealings with Gringotts and do business only with the new bank; the other even-handedly analyzed the bank's impact on the battle between the Ministry and the goblins, suggesting that it would either cause the goblins to back off, or accelerate their recent aggressive tendencies.

Harry decided to go for a fly, staying out for forty-five minutes. He missed flying with Ron, and wondered how long the dementors would be such a threat that one couldn't go for a casual fly. On his return, Kreacher told him that Bill had been over, and had said that he would try again. Deciding to visit Bill, Harry threw the powder into the fireplace and walked in, only to feel a cushiony but quickly increasing resistance. He'd never felt that from a fireplace before, and imagined that it was what happened when someone was denied access. He assumed that Bill must have had his fireplace access altered for security reasons, and decided to Apparate to Bill's place, where he was further surprised that he couldn't see it at all. He was sure he was in the right place—he could see Dobby's grave—but, no house. Suddenly the answer came to him, and he Apparated back home.

Five minutes later, Bill came through Harry's fireplace. "Where were you?"

“Just some stuff I had to do,” Harry replied, having previously prepared the answer. “I see you did the Fidelius Charm to your place. Good idea.”

“Fleur’s idea, but yes, I couldn’t argue. I came over to give you access, as well as put you to work. Is there anything else you have to do today?”

Harry shook his head. “I’d planned to help Dudley out later, but mostly, no. You want me to use the Elder Wand, to tamper-proof documents?”

Bill nodded. “Passbooks, deposit slips, loan statements, basically anything on which we record that we took money, or are distributing money. You don’t mind?”

Already having told Bill that he would do it, Harry shook his head. “How long do you think it’ll take?”

Bill grunted. “As long as you’re willing to do it. Demand has been very high; all three of us are very busy. We have a temporary office in the Ministry that we’re using.”

“Well, don’t bother to show me your place now, we can do it when you’re not so busy. Just bring over the forms, and I’ll get started.”

“I guess that works,” agreed Bill. “I’ll have to come over to store money that customers will deposit, so I can pick up what you’ve done to that point. Try to do roughly equal numbers of each of the forms as you go.”

Bill left and returned in less than a minute, leaving several bags of parchment forms. Harry took a pile from each bag, put them on the coffee table, and started Charming as he’d learned from Bill the day before, making sure to clearly separate the ones that were done from the ones that weren’t. It was slow; he found he could comfortably do one form every ten seconds. But he found he didn’t mind the work. It was mindless, but he found a certain tranquility in the mindlessness of it.

After two hours, Dudley came through the fireplace. "How're you doing?"

"Just Charming these forms. It's very repetitive, but Bill needs it done."

"Oh, yes, to prevent fraud. I've heard about that."

Harry chuckled. "I guess Molly told you."

Dudley nodded. "She's interesting. She's a mother, all right, but pretty different from Mum. Look, about what I asked yesterday—"

"It's okay, I'll do it," Harry interrupted.

Dudley looked relieved. "Thanks, I appreciate it. So, is there anything I can do to help out with this?"

Mildly surprised at the offer, Harry wondered if Dudley was trying to get away from Molly for a short time. About to answer in the negative, Harry suddenly thought of something. "Yes, there is. Just get a pile in front of you, hand one to me, then take it and put it away while giving me another."

Dudley agreed, and after a few false starts, the system started working well; Harry estimated that it cut the time it took in half. Bill popped by at 1:00 to get into the vault; he appeared impressed at their system and progress, and came back in a few minutes with more large bags of forms, putting them on the floor near Harry and Dudley but not interrupting them.

They took a lunch break at 1:30, talking about the wizarding world, then about the visit to the Dursleys' home. Harry warned Dudley that he wouldn't hold back when talking to his mother; Dudley didn't object.

When they came back to the living room, Harry heard his name being called. He looked around in surprise, then realized where it was coming from. "Professor," he said, walking over to the portrait. "Sorry, I'm not used to your being here. Nice to see you."

“And you, Harry. But what request did I make of you yesterday?”

“Oh, yeah, Albus. Sorry.” As Dudley edged closer, Harry gestured to him. “Dudley, this is Albus Dumbledore, you met him once, a few years ago.”

“A pleasure, Dudley,” said Dumbledore’s portrait genially. “I am happy to see that you seem to be doing better than you were then.”

Very taken aback, Dudley slowly nodded. “Um, yeah.” After a pause, he looked more closely at the portrait. “Are you alive?”

Dumbledore chuckled. “That is a very tricky metaphysical question, my dear young man. In the sense that you think of it, no. My physical body died, over a year ago. But through a magical process that requires a complex explanation, my... essence, for lack of a better word, is captured here. One could say it is an echo of myself. I feel as though I am alive, though of course I am restricted to a very limited area of movement. I have three frames—here, at Hogwarts, and at the Wizengamot—and I can travel between those.” Dudley nodded; Harry could see he was still unnerved at talking to a portrait.

“Harry, I could not help but overhear your conversation in the kitchen, and I thought I would offer some advice, if you are interested.”

“Sure, of course,” Harry agreed.

“You know, through what Severus showed you when he died, why Dudley’s mother developed an aversion to wizards; that aversion through time has developed into something of a neurosis, which is in a sense a medical condition. A psychological one, but I believe it should be considered the same way. She will not want you there, Harry, and may be highly insulting in an attempt to cause you to leave. I urge you to expect this, and not to take anything she may say personally. You are a symbol of what she fears, but you personally have nothing to do with it. If she rails against you, consider that she is railing against a figment of her fears, because in fact, she is. She does not know you, so nothing she says about you should be considered truly offensive.”

Harry sighed. He didn't want to admit what he was going to say, but he felt he should be honest when talking to Dumbledore, because otherwise, what was the point of having him there? "I understand that, but... after everything I went through there, it's hard to ignore. I'd get angry even if I tried not to."

Dumbledore nodded. "Understandable, of course. Part of becoming an adult, Harry, is unlearning old habits, and understanding others better. Now, some adults make it through their entire lives without accomplishing this, but I believe that you and Dudley can do this. Dudley, your challenge is to make your mother understand that you are the same person you have always been, but not the person she sees you as."

"Her Duddykins," said Dudley reluctantly.

"Yes, exactly," agreed Dumbledore. "She has infantilized you for far too long. You may feel reluctant to force her to stop, because that comes along with her love and affection, which you naturally do desire. This is important for you to recognize. You are Dudley Dursley, almost eighteen years old, an adult. We know that she loves her Duddykins. The question is, does she love Dudley Dursley, and is she capable of recognizing the difference? Whatever happens, neither of you should consider that you have done anything wrong. This is Petunia's issue, her challenge. If she is not ready, then she is not. You must be patient with her, but not allow her to see you as an infant."

There was silence as Harry and Dudley absorbed Dumbledore's words. Finally Dudley, looking thoughtful, said, "Thanks... Albus. That makes sense. I'll try to keep that in mind."

"Yes, thank you, Profess—sorry, Albus," added Harry. "I wonder how long it'll take me to change that."

"Old habits die hard," said Dumbledore, "for both of you, and Petunia as well. I will take my leave now."

Harry spoke quickly, before Dumbledore could leave. "Oh, one more thing, Profe—Albus." Harry grimaced, annoyed at having made the mistake yet again. "The next time you go to the Wizengamot, would you tell them that I've decided to accept their offer."

Dumbledore smiled. "Of course I will be pleased to do so. I will convey their response later this evening." With a nod, he moved out of the portrait.

Dudley looked at Harry. "I thought you weren't going to decide anything about your future for a while."

Harry shrugged. "This is different, since I don't have to actually do anything I don't want to. They'll send me owls telling me that such-and-such a case will be at this time tomorrow, and like that woman said, it's up to me whether to attend or not. So, are you okay to get back to it?"

They sat down and resumed their previous pattern; after an hour, they dug into the second batch of forms Bill had brought. They chatted occasionally while they worked; while some concentration was necessary, conversation was possible. Taking short breaks every hour, they worked until five forty-five, when they ran out of forms to charm. Bill came five minutes later for another vault run, expressing amazement that they had finished. "Thanks, both of you," he said. "I never expected you to get through this. We'll be set for quite a while."

Bill then took the next ten minutes showing both Harry and Dudley his place's location so they could visit. When they finished, Harry asked, "How long were the lines, people waiting to see you?"

"Almost an hour, from what I could gather," said Bill. "That article really did a lot for us. Though some people were disappointed that you weren't there," he added teasingly.

"Well, I could do more good at home," Harry joked. "But I'm glad it's going well. Was it mostly loans, or deposits too?"

“About fifty-fifty,” said Bill. “And I took a few meetings with Diagon Alley merchants; we talked about short-term loans and lines of credit. And now you’re not understanding, are you,” he added, noting Harry’s expression.

“Sorry.”

“I understand it,” said Dudley casually. “My Dad owns a small business, he talks about that kind of thing at home. What interest are you charging?”

“Well, there’d be a yearly minimum, but eight percent.”

Dudley nodded. “Sounds reasonable.”

“The goblins, apparently, were charging twenty,” said Bill.

“Twenty?” Dudley gaped. “Wow! That’s practically robbery!”

“The merchants seemed to think so,” agreed Bill. “They were quite happy to hear the rates. Some of them were very keen to get loans quickly, because the goblins have been holding out on them too. They were hoping that now that things are getting back to normal, the economy would take off again, but they couldn’t get loans to finance inventory expansion and hiring new staff. So, there’s some pent-up demand; after dinner, I’ll be spending a few hours meeting more business owners. It would be nice if this got the economy moving again.”

Back at Grimmauld Place, Dudley looked inquiringly at Harry. “I’m surprised you didn’t know about that. You were there when Dad talked about it.”

“Wasn’t listening much, I’m afraid.” Harry decided not to add that almost anything he’d said at such times was dismissed or criticized, so he’d learned not to make comments or ask questions, which led him to not listen much.

They talked more during dinner, Dudley explaining what he knew about what Bill had been talking about, and that he’d had introductory

business courses at Smeltings. "You own a bank, you should learn more about this."

With a wry grin, Harry replied, "You may have noticed, or heard, I'm kind of allergic to the word 'should' right now."

"Oh, yes, that's right, Ron did mention that. I asked him why, and he said he didn't know, and wasn't sure that even you knew."

Harry nodded. "No, I don't, really. Even if it's something I don't mind doing that much, or know I should do, I still really dislike being told I should. I was never really that way before, so it's kind of strange."

"Maybe you should try to figure out why," said Dudley.

"Well, if I could, then—" Harry cut himself off as Dudley grinned; with annoyance, Harry realized he hadn't gotten the joke. "Very funny."

Dudley shrugged. "A little funny, maybe." They talked for another half hour, then left for the Dursleys'.

* * * * *

Later that evening, Harry Apparated Dudley back to the living room of Grimmauld Place, where Ron and Hermione were sitting, talking. "Hey, you guys," Harry greeted them. "What are you doing here?"

"We both just finished working," said Ron, "though of course there was a dinner break. We just figured we'd hang out here. We didn't know you'd be gone, but sometimes it's nice to be alone."

"Dudley and I could leave," Harry joked.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Harry, be serious. Oh, how did it go?"

Harry and Dudley exchanged a look. "It could have been worse," said Dudley.

Harry nodded. "That's as much as you can say, really. The good part is, they do want Dudley back, both Vernon and Petunia. The bad part is, Petunia's just not ready to accept him as a wizard."

"You know what it reminded me of?" said Dudley. "Last year at Smeltings, they showed us this movie in social studies class about a kid our age who was gay, and the whole thing about telling his parents, and they couldn't accept it at first, but finally they understood that this was just the way he was, and they had to accept him the way he was. Of course, we all made fun of it, like, 'oh, Thomas, it's all right if you're gay, we'll accept you as you really are, just keep your hands off me,' that kind of thing. But it really reminded me of that. I'm a wizard, I can't change that, but she's in denial. 'Oh, Dudley, you can change, just don't do that anymore. It's a choice.' She really said that. I swear, I think she'd actually be happier if I was gay than if I was a wizard."

Ron grinned. "What if you were a gay wizard?"

Harry and Dudley burst out laughing as Hermione looked on disapprovingly. "I think she couldn't handle that," Dudley finally said, still chuckling. "She'd try to change both things, but she'd try to change the wizard thing first."

"I came in for some abuse, of course," added Harry.

"Yes, it's all your fault, apparently," agreed Dudley facetiously. "Again, in that gay movie, the father accused someone else of making his kid gay. My mother accused him of making me a wizard. Everything was just like that movie."

"Well, it's human nature," said Hermione, more serious than the others. "We want to blame someone for the things that happen to us, but if we don't want to blame the one directly involved, we find someone else to blame."

Harry rolled his eyes. "And that does seem to have been my function at that house, all these years. Between her, Snape, and now the goblins, I seem to be a professional blame-taker." He saw pity in Hermione's eyes, and suddenly wished he hadn't said it.

"Anyway, it's obviously going to take more time," he continued. "It was pretty clear that Dudley's father, while he's not thrilled with it, can get past it. It's just his mother. I tried to tell her that wizards aren't terrible people, but of course, she doesn't believe anything I say. Dudley tried to tell her, but she accused me of influencing him. At one point, she accused me of putting him under a spell."

"Then Harry got all sarcastic, which didn't help," said Dudley, with a mildly accusing glance at Harry.

Harry shrugged apologetically. "It was so absurd, I couldn't help it. For the most part, I tried to follow Professor Dumble—"

"Albus," corrected Dudley with a small grin.

"Yes, Albus, thank you," sighed Harry, with a 'very funny' glance at Dudley. "I tried to follow his advice, but it wasn't easy." In response to a question from Hermione, he summarized what Dumbledore had said.

"I can see why it was difficult, but he was absolutely right," said Hermione enthusiastically. "You're so lucky to have his portrait here. You can get the benefit of his wisdom anytime you want."

This caused Harry to look over and notice that Dumbledore was in his portrait. "Hello, Albus," he said from across the room.

"Good evening, Harry," said Dumbledore. "And thank you, Hermione, though in life I was not always as wise as I hoped to be. Harry, I should have mentioned earlier... many portraits, especially those in the headmaster's office, pretend to be sleeping when they do not wish to impose their presence on those in the room. I prefer not to do so, but I hope that you will not consider that you need to include me in any particular conversation simply because I am in the frame. Unless you specifically wish to include me, I hope you will think of me as simply a portrait."

"Okay, I'll keep it in mind," he said. Turning back to the others, he added, "You know, you can come over and talk to him, if he's in the

frame. I don't have to be here. If he doesn't mind." He glanced at the portrait.

"Of course, I would be most pleased," said Dumbledore.

"Anyway, Dudley, you just have to keep after her," advised Hermione earnestly. "Don't rub her nose in it, but don't let her pretend it isn't the case, either. Are you going to live in the wizarding world, or the Muggle world?"

"That came up, actually. Dad asked me to stay with them, but I said I'd rather not. It's partly that I need to live in the magical world for a while, but also, I don't want to live with them right now. Mum would be all over me, telling me what a horrible thing magic is, and I don't need that. I said I'd visit, and I will, but I think she needs more time."

"You could write her, also," suggested Hermione. "Maybe once or twice a week, tell her what's going on in your life. Maybe she'd gradually see that being a wizard isn't so different, or so bad."

Harry could see on Dudley's face the reaction he himself had had more than once recently: Dudley wasn't happy with the suggestion, but didn't want to reject it and be rude, and he knew it made sense. "Hmmm... maybe," he said.

"Oh, I wanted to ask you," he said to Ron and Hermione, "how would you feel about coming over for dinner tomorrow?"

"Sure," said Ron, but Hermione looked doubtful. "Of course, we'd be happy to, but Harry, it could look bad. It was pretty obvious the other night how angry you were with Molly, and if we come over here, it could look like you're deliberately avoiding her."

Irritated, Harry responded, "So, I can't see you unless I see her too? Maybe I need a vacation from being told what to do. It's practically the first thing that comes out of her mouth when she sees me."

Hermione was clearly trying to rein in her own annoyance. "No, Harry, I'm not saying you can't see us. I was just saying how I thought it might look. But of course, we'll come."

Ron nodded, his expression indicating that he would have just agreed and not said what Hermione had. "Oh, I wanted to tell you, people are pretty excited about the bank," he said. "They were asking so many questions, I had to go ask Bill a couple of things, and he was getting annoyed because he was already so busy, the line was backed way up. I'm going to have to become an expert on what the bank does, if only so I can do my job." He chuckled. "Funny how I say 'my job,' but I'm not even getting paid."

"Well, you're doing a lot of good, and I'm proud of you," said Hermione firmly.

"And that makes it all worthwhile."

"I knew you were going to say something like that," she chastised him. "You can't just accept a compliment."

"Not when you say it like you'd compliment a four-year-old on eating his vegetables!"

"I did not say it like that! I am proud of you!"

"I'm looking forward to tomorrow night already," sighed Harry. To a grinning Dudley, he added, "Of course, they've been like this for years. I should have known all along that they'd get together."

"Okay, we'll finish the argument at home," said Ron, getting up. "See you tomorrow, at six?" Harry nodded, and they left. Dudley left soon thereafter, thanking Harry for his help.

Harry walked over to the mail desk; there was mail that had arrived in the past ten hours, and Dumbledore was still there in the frame. Harry told Dumbledore what had happened with the Dursleys. When he finished, Dumbledore said, "Petunia's reactions were very much in line with what was to be expected, and I would say that you did a reasonably good job of holding back your emotional reactions."

Harry nodded. "I'd rather not have them at all, to be honest. I know it's all her problem, I wish it just didn't affect me."

“One thing at a time,” Dumbledore counseled. “Emotional wounds cannot vanish overnight; it takes time. For her, too. She has deep emotional wounds; she has simply allowed them to fester, rather than heal them. Some people treasure their wounds, Harry, their feeling of righteousness. Perhaps I should have said, many people do, to various extents. Good man though he is, my brother does, regarding me, as you saw when you received the portrait. Especially in my later years, I tried very hard not to hold grudges. Draco is in a sense correct when he says that a grudge can provide motivation and energy, but it is energy of quite a negative kind, that you would do well to stay away from. In that matter, Ginny’s feelings are extremely understandable, though I would have recommended that she allow you to do what your conscience felt was right. But she is still young, and she was being honest about her feelings, which is also to be commended.”

Dumbledore’s insight reminded him of another current problem. “What do you think I should do about Molly?”

With a smile, Dumbledore replied, “I cannot help but find it ironic that you ask me what I think you should do.”

Harry also smiled. “Well, maybe when I ask, it’s okay.”

“As is so often the case. I should tell you that I myself was on the receiving end of her advice more than once. This is one of the many small challenges we have in our lives: how to handle people whom we care about, but whose current actions are highly annoying. We can change our own reactions, but that is difficult. We can attempt to change their actions, but that is far more complex and problematic, and can negatively affect our relationship with them if not handled properly. Another part of becoming an adult is learning how to relate to others in such situations without alienating them.”

“And, some adults don’t totally manage that either, right?”

“More than you might guess,” Dumbledore agreed. “Molly herself is arguably not doing as well as she might. I believe she is seeing you as if you were one of her own children, and treating you as such. Her

blind spot is that she does not have intimate knowledge of your childhood, and unconsciously assumes it must be similar to that of her own children, which it is not. She may be realizing this now, but it is a process for her. I can only urge you to be as tolerant as possible, and when your tolerance has run out, communicate with her in a clear but not hostile manner. One trap that many people fall into is that they do not communicate their feelings, let hostility build, and when they can tolerate no more, they are in no emotional condition to confront the other person in a non-hostile manner. It is difficult, but far better in the long run, to say something early on."

Harry slowly nodded. "I didn't do that, of course, but I think she knows how I feel by now. Well... anyway, thank you, Albus. I appreciate the advice."

"Not at all, Harry. By the way, you should be able to find a notice from the Wizengamot in the mail. They would like you to appear at 2:00 tomorrow afternoon, first to be sworn in as a member, then to give testimony about Draco."

"Is there some particular reason they're doing it in that order?"

"I cannot be sure of their motives, but I do know that the testimony of a member of the Wizengamot is accorded greater weight than that of a non-member. After you have been sworn in, what you say will be taken very seriously indeed."

Good news for Malfoy, thought Harry. "I understand. Well, I think I'll get to the mail, do that before bed." Dumbledore nodded, said good night, and was soon out of the frame.

The letters were mostly about the bank; there was a lot of general praise, and two inquiries about the exact source of the money. Gleason had recommended that it simply be referred to as Harry's 'inheritance,' which was accurate, strictly speaking, if misleading. This was because Gleason and Bill felt that if it was publicly known that the money was inherited from the Black family, however legitimately, distant Black relatives might initiate legal action, trying to claim part of the fortune for themselves. Harry would almost certainly win the fight, but the presence of conflict could undermine confidence in the bank,

if its assets were in any question legally. Reading the letters, it seemed to Harry that a few people knew that there was no chance that the Potter family had that kind of money, and were curious about its source. Fortunately, thought Harry, I don't have to answer those questions, and he put the letters aside.

Next, there was a letter from Luna; he was suddenly curious to know how she had responded to his three-page letter, by far the longest he'd ever written.

Dear Harry,

Thank you so much for your interesting letter. I feel as though I suddenly got to know you a lot better than I had before. You're kind of well-known for not talking about yourself much, so I was very complimented that you told me what you did.

Harry chuckled as he read. Still as direct as ever, he thought. I didn't know I was well-known for that, but I suppose it makes sense, when everyone's been digging into your life since you were eleven. The letter continued:

You talked about how you feel as though you don't know yourself. I think we can't really know ourselves that well, not when we're this age. I mean, for example, when we're five, we hardly know ourselves at all. All we know is what we want. Of course, there are some Hogwarts students who are like that, too. Michael leaps to mind. I think that how well we know ourselves has a connection to how much we understand in general: about people, about life, and so forth. For example, I said that you're well-known for not talking about yourself. I'd guess that's because everyone wants to know about you, and it's a protective reaction. I also assume that's why you haven't told the story of the last year. You might be able to understand that about yourself, but when you were, maybe, twelve, you wouldn't have understood it. There are probably things about yourself that you'll understand better in ten years, or even two or three. It's hard to say.

You said it seemed as though I would know myself. I suppose I do (though not completely, of course), which is why I wasn't popular until recently. I know myself well enough not to worry what other people

think of me. I think it's partly my natural character, and partly that my mother died when she did. I think it would have affected many people differently. For me, it made me think a lot.

Harry read on, fascinated, as Luna described what she'd gone through when her mother died, how it had changed her, made her 'grow up' and become more aware of many things, but at the same time made her more determined than ever to be who she was no matter what anyone thought. She finished the letter with news of Hogwarts, some of them things he'd already heard from Neville.

He sat there, marveling at what she'd written. She'd revealed more about herself than anyone ever had to him, and much more than he'd ever revealed about himself to anyone, even Ron and Hermione. It just wouldn't have occurred to him to do it, and he wondered how Luna could. I guess that's part of what makes her different, he thought.

Part of him wanted to start writing a response right then, but he told himself he should wait, take a night to think about what she'd said. He put the letter aside, and read through the rest, including the Wizengamot's invitation. He didn't respond, figuring that Dumbledore would let them know about his acceptance.

He went to bed an hour later, first reading, then turning off the light and thinking about things Luna and Dumbledore had said. I may not know the answers, he thought, but maybe I'm beginning to understand what the questions are.

* * * * *

Dressed for the first time since Fred's funeral in formal robes, Harry strode down the corridors of the Ministry, drawing stares as always. He had just dropped by the Ministry offices where Bank of the Phoenix business was being conducted, talked to Bill for a few moments, met Pamela and Derrick, and said hello to the customers waiting. He said 'yes' to a woman who asked him whether the bank's money was safe. When she asked where it was, he answered, "If I told you that, it wouldn't be safe, would it?" Pleased with the laugh the joke got from the bystanders, he said goodbye and moved on.

Earlier, he had spent most of the morning writing Luna back, telling her about his early childhood with the Dursleys, his discovery of the wizarding world, and how he'd felt about it. He wasn't sure whether it would help her understand him better, but even though it was very personal, something about writing it felt good. He understood that it was because she had said so much about herself that he could feel comfortable with it.

He got off the elevator at the correct floor, walked down the hall, and was intercepted by an old man, tall with gray hair around the edges of a bald head. "Mr. Potter," he said firmly, as if making an affirmation rather than an introduction. He offered his hand, which Harry shook. "My name is Edward Martin Flourish, the fourth," he announced self-importantly. "I am the senior member of the Wizengamot. My father and grandfather were also members, and were the first to meet new arrivals. We like to say that we greet every new member of the Wizengamot with a Flourish."

Harry grinned, partly because he knew that he was supposed to. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Flourish. Do you have anything to do with Flourish and Blotts, may I ask?"

"Yes, indeed, my family has owned that esteemed business for over a century," he said. "Please, come with me." They walked together through the door that Harry had passed through once before, on that stressful day three years ago.

Inside, a crowd of perhaps four dozen witches and wizards stood waiting, and to Harry's great surprise, he received applause when he walked through the door. Harry was debating how to respond when, from behind him, Flourish said, "Thank you all, but there is no need to applaud for me." This was greeted with laughter and some scoffing, as members stepped forward to introduce themselves to Harry. He tried to remember their names, but knew he wouldn't be able to. He did remember Bennefort's name, and greeted her with it when she shook his hand. The only other member he recognized was Cornelius Fudge, who he greeted politely, but well remembering Fudge's vendetta against himself and Dumbledore.

Within a few minutes, he was being sworn in, promising to “administer justice fairly, in accordance with the law and what is right.” Harry felt like asking what happened when those two things conflicted, but thought he’d better not make jokes in such a serious setting.

Harry was then gestured to the chair from which one gave testimony. “Would you please have a seat, Jurist Potter,” said Flourish.

Sitting, Harry asked, “I’m sorry, what did you just call me?”

Bennefort explained. “‘Jurist’ is the title by which members of the Wizengamot can be called. It is not unlike ‘Professor’ at Hogwarts.”

Harry was asked about what he knew of what Draco Malfoy had done, and answered truthfully, saying both what he knew and what he suspected. After he had answered all questions, Flourish asked, “Is there anything you would like to add, Jurist Potter?”

Harry wondered if all witnesses were asked this, or if it was a special privilege granted to jurists. “Yes, there is. I recommend strongly that Draco Malfoy be shown leniency, and not be held legally responsible for his actions.”

There was some murmuring among the jurists. “Why is that, Jurist Potter?”

Harry had prepared for this question. “One reason is that I’m very familiar with his childhood. He was raised in a way that predisposed him to the kind of thing he did; he was steered rather strongly by his father in this direction. Another is that I’m very confident that he plans to change the direction of his life, and never repeat the sort of thing that he’s done. I wouldn’t request leniency for him if I wasn’t confident of that.”

“May I ask what informs this confidence, Jurist Potter?” asked a man in the back row.

“I’m sorry, do you mean, why am I so confident?” asked Harry; the man nodded. “The answer to that question is something I promised I

would keep private, so I'm not going to answer. Let's just say, I'm very confident."

"Would you be willing to give the same answer on pain of perjury, if this were sworn testimony?" the man persisted.

Harry glanced around, surprised. "I'm sorry, I thought—I mean, I assumed it was sworn testimony anytime anyone said anything from this chair."

Bennefort spoke. "Normally it is, but speaking unsworn is a courtesy extended to our number in certain matters. In any case, I gather that we can take your response as a 'yes.' Is there a particular reason you request clemency for Mr. Malfoy, but for no other Death Eater?"

He wondered if she would have asked the question if she hadn't already known the answer. "Yes, there is. Narcissa Malfoy saved my life shortly before I defeated Voldemort." This caused a fair bit of murmuring among the jurists; Flourish asked for quiet. Harry briefly told the story, making sure to include her motivation. "So, I make this special effort for that reason. But I wouldn't be doing it if I wasn't confident that he won't do any such thing in the future. What I say is the truth, and... consistent with my ethics," he added, glancing at Bennefort.

"Are there any more questions?" asked Flourish; there was silence. "Very well. Jurist Potter, will you be joining us in the deliberations and vote?"

Harry's eyebrows went up. "It wouldn't seem right, since I just testified. Can I do that?"

"Normally, if a jurist has a close personal involvement in a case, he recuses himself," said Bennefort. "But it is not a requirement. You have the right to join the deliberations, if you choose."

Harry shook his head. "I see. But no, I won't be joining, thanks."

"Very well," said Flourish. "Jurist Potter, thank you very much for your time and testimony." Nodding, Harry stood and left. Well, that wasn't

so bad, he thought. But, probably the last time I see that place for a while. I'm not sure I want to spend my time up there, listening to all that.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 9, The Chocolate Frog Card: The Malfoy matter behind him, the bank doing well, and the dementors kept out of Diagon Alley, Harry is able to enjoy an evening with Ron and Hermione, their first extended time together since Voldemort's defeat. But soon thereafter, Harry lets his guard down for just a second...

From Chapter 9: "Do you ever feel satisfied, because Voldemort's gone?" asked Hermione.

"You'd think I would," Harry agreed. "It feels like I should. And I'm glad he's gone, but... no, I really don't have that feeling you're talking about. I guess that throughout my life, especially my time at Hogwarts, I've always felt as though the next crisis was just around the corner, because it almost always was. It's like, I can't let down my guard. Who knows, maybe that's what's causing me to be weird like I am. I just keep feeling like something else is going to happen."

Chapter 9

The Chocolate Frog Card

The rest of the afternoon went by fairly slowly, but Harry didn't feel that was a bad thing. A relaxed, unhurried pace of life appealed to him now; he sometimes felt as though Grimmauld Place was a refuge from the outside world, which was constantly trying to drag him into its clutches. Kingsley had said that Harry deserved to take a year off, but Harry somehow suspected that it wouldn't be allowed to happen.

He considered whether he was ready yet to think about the future. Relationship? Definitely not. Job? No, not yet. Place to live? Maybe. Godric's Hollow would be nice; I could use some of my money to build a totally new place on the same land. Strange, how I know I don't want to live here for the rest of my life, but for now I don't want to leave it. It's like... this is a transitional place, someplace to hide until I'm ready to face the world again. Who knows when that'll be, but I suppose I'll know it when it happens.

Dinner was scheduled for 6:30, and Ron and Hermione came through the fireplace at a few minutes before six. Harry and Ron sat on the living room sofa, while Hermione chose a chair.

"So, we heard that you were sworn in today," said Hermione.

"Yep. Apparently, you can call me 'Jurist Potter' now."

"I don't know," said Ron. "I sort of prefer, 'hey, you.'"

Harry chuckled. "Okay, but only because you've known me for so long. So, is anybody gossiping about what I said in there?"

Hermione and Ron glanced at each other, and shook their heads. "People are surprised it hasn't leaked," said Ron. "Apparently, the Wizengamot usually leaks pretty easily. But I assume nothing unexpected happened."

"No, it didn't. I was just wondering. So, Hermione, are you helping Bill now?"

She nodded. "I was almost finished helping Arthur set up the Wizarding Unity Department anyway. I'll still go back from time to time, to help with minor adjustments, and to answer questions. But a bank is an interesting challenge, with some things pretty different than what I was doing with Arthur."

"For one thing, she gets paid now," noted Ron, trying not to smile.

"That wasn't what I meant," she said reprovingly; now, Ron did smile. "But I admit, I'm happy to get paid. No, I meant that the organization is different. Bill had some books on banking that I borrowed last night, so I understand the basic idea. Bill has to do a lot of this himself, and he knows that, but I can help. I think he's only gotten four or five hours sleep a night since it started. He thought he'd have more time to set it up and let the business grow slowly, but because of the goblins' actions, he's under heavy pressure to serve a lot of people, as quickly as possible. But he's also said that early on in a business's life is when mistakes are more likely to be made, things that could be costly in the future. So he's got to do a good job, and do it quickly. I don't envy him."

Harry nodded, suddenly feeling guilty that he'd roped Bill into doing what he was doing, but knowing better than to say anything to Hermione about it.

"As for me, I just did my usual thing," said Ron. "I spent some time today talking to Percy, and it was actually very useful. I'm trying to use Ministry resources to get things done for the Muggle-borns, but I don't know the Ministry all that well. Percy really knows the ins and outs of the place, the right people to go to, the way to ask for something, that sort of thing. He suggested that I use my name a lot, like, 'I'm Ron Weasley, and I was wondering if you could help with...' that sort of thing." Harry smiled to himself, knowing that casual as Ron tried to sound, that his name opened doors had to be a big boost to his ego. "He said you have to persuade, and people should think that it's in their interest to help you. Apparently, the Ministry is a big vat of influence trading, or maybe I should say, favor-trading. I was a little surprised I hadn't known that before, since Dad works there, but that's the kind of thing he tried to stay away from. He hardly ever

asked for favors, and being in the Muggle Artifact Office, wasn't in a good position to give many. And that was fine with him. But now, he needs resources, so he needed Percy to give him some pointers also." Ron shook his head in wonder. "It's a strange business."

"I'd definitely want no part of it," agreed Harry.

Ron chuckled. "Percy also said that if I need something really badly and was having trouble getting it, saying that it was something Harry Potter wanted to see happen would probably do it." Harry rolled his eyes as Ron grinned. "Yeah, I know. I said it partly to get that reaction. I know it's out of the question, of course, and I told Percy that. I figure if I want something that badly, I'll just ask you for the money for it instead." Harry nodded firmly.

"Harry," said Hermione hesitantly, "how are you doing with the... the thing where you don't want to do anything, or think about the future?"

"Yeah, I'm not even sure what to call it," agreed Harry. "But, no change, I suppose. I mean, I did stop by the bank offices yesterday when I didn't have to, so you could say that was something. But I don't know, I feel like I'm waiting for the heat to die down or something, so everyone stops coming up to me and talking to me every time I go out."

"That may take twenty or thirty years," Ron pointed out, deadpan.

"I have money, I can wait," Harry joked back.

"Actually, Harry," said Hermione in her you-should-listen-to-me tone, "Not going out may make things worse. If you became a recluse, people would wonder what happened to you, there'd be more speculation, and it would be even more when you finally did come out into public life."

"Thanks, Hermione."

She looked at him unhappily. At Ron's prompting, Harry told them what had happened at the Wizengamot, and they speculated about

whether Malfoy himself would be called to testify, or whether Harry's recommendation would be accepted on its face.

"Oh, I don't want to forget to tell you," Harry said to Hermione, "Neville told me in his last letter that Pansy Parkinson was seen going to McGonagall's office the other day, and then she was absent from a few classes. She wouldn't say what she'd been doing, but I think we can guess that she probably took a Portkey out of the school, maybe to see the Wizengamot."

"Good," said Hermione smugly.

"Well, Neville and the others don't know. When I write Neville back, do you mind if I say what we think it was?"

She shook her head. "Go ahead. I don't care if she knows, or the whole school knows. She's vile, and I doubt she's had some sort of conversion like Draco has."

Harry and Ron exchanged surprised glances, as Hermione was to be told only that Veritaserum was used, not the content of what was discussed. Harry asked Ron silently whether he had said anything; Ron shook his head.

Noticing their byplay, she said with mild impatience, "Oh, come on, you two, it couldn't be more obvious. I suspected it when he wouldn't identify you, Harry, when we were captured. Now I know that might have been for other reasons, like he was afraid of being wrong, or he just didn't want Voldemort coming. But I know you. Maybe he wasn't trying, but he almost killed Ron. There's no way you'd have done that unless you were sure he regretted what he'd done and wasn't going to do it again. I'd guess that being the target of Voldemort's wrath put the fear of God into him, and he's a different person now. Or something like that." She gave them a satisfied look.

"Well," said Harry, impressed, "if Draco ever asks me about it, I want to be able to say truthfully that I didn't break my promise, so I'm just not going to say anything about that."

"That's okay," she said. "Your face already told the story."

"I guess I need to have a chat with my face." Thinking about Malfoy made him recall something else from their talk. "Oh, I wanted to ask both of you about something he said." Figuring that Malfoy's criticism of him for not thinking more before walking into the forest wasn't something that he couldn't repeat to Hermione, he told them what Malfoy had said. "So, I wanted to know what you two thought of that. I mean, part of the reason I didn't talk to you was that I knew you'd try to talk me out of it, and I was sure that it had to be done."

Ron and Hermione exchanged a look; it seemed to Harry that they'd discussed the topic before, but he wasn't sure. Expecting the always-opinionated Hermione to speak first, he was surprised when Ron did. "Well, obviously, he's got kind of a point. Since it wasn't until Voldemort was dead that we found out you did that, it seemed pointless to spend much time debating whether you did the right thing or not. It was done. And obviously, we would have tried to talk you out of it, if you'd come to us and told us. At that point, I wouldn't have been able to think through all the ins and outs of it. It would have been just, 'are you crazy?'"

"Since it happened," continued Hermione, "I did think a lot along the same lines Malfoy did. I think he's right, but there is another side, one that you just said you mentioned to him: that it would mean he could still come back. The big question is, what are the chances that once dead he would stay dead until you died of old age, and if he did manage to come back before you died, how many deaths would he cause. Those two things have to be weighed against each other, and it's not easy, because it's hard to guess the chances of his coming back again. A reasonable argument can be made for doing what you did. But I have to agree with Malfoy, it's the kind of thing that deserves more thought than you gave it."

Harry nodded. "I didn't even think twice about it at the time; a thought never occurred to me along the lines that you and Draco said. It's hard to say what would have happened if it had. But I might very well have done it anyway. It was just too big a chance to take, and..." He thought for a minute in silence.

"If I didn't manage to kill him, I think I would have felt like I screwed it up, like I was supposed to go into the forest and didn't because I was too chicken, and I'd have felt like, every person that Voldemort killed after that was my fault, something I could have stopped by giving myself up. If that had happened, I would have spent my time wishing I'd done it. And even if I did manage to kill him, I think I'd be obsessed with the idea of him coming back, I feel like I'd never have gotten a moment's peace. Even when he was nothing more than a ghost, my scar still hurt sometimes. I don't think I'd want to live my life like that."

"Better than not living at all," said Ron solemnly.

"I'm not sure I agree with that," Harry responded. "Like Dumbledore said to Voldemort that time, there are worse things than dying. I think one of them may be knowing that your death might have saved lives, and your life might cost lives. Don't get me wrong; it sucks, and I know that. But sometimes... that's just life, I guess. You do what you can with the cards you're dealt."

"Besides... I know this hadn't happened when I made that decision, but... especially now, I'm not afraid of dying. That thing that happened, I think of it as meeting Dumbledore at King's Cross... I don't really know what it was; you could say it was my mind playing tricks on me, and I couldn't say you're absolutely wrong. But I know what I felt, and I felt that was real, in some way. I felt that there's something that happens after you die, and it's nothing to be afraid of. Nothing specific said that, it was just a feeling. But if some doctor said to me, you're going to die tomorrow, I wouldn't be that bothered."

Ron and Hermione exchanged an alarmed look. "Well, we would, so don't do that," said Hermione sharply.

"I wasn't planning on anything," Harry protested. "You know what I mean."

"Yes, and you know what we mean," Ron retorted. "Not that anything similar will ever happen again, but... don't go walking into any forests."

Harry nodded, appreciating their concern. "I won't, don't worry."

"I wonder," said Ron, "you said that Dumbledore said in Snape's memories that you had to die, but then at the Hog's Head, the portrait said he suspected it didn't have to happen, he hoped it wouldn't. Why didn't he say that to Snape?"

"I don't think it was his plan for Snape to show me his memories," said Harry thoughtfully. "Because they didn't know Snape would die like that. I think Snape just did it on the spur of the moment, because he saw me. Maybe Dumbledore thought my surviving was such a longshot that it wasn't worth mentioning to Snape. Also, maybe part of the point was that I had to do it thinking there wasn't a chance I'd survive, that it wouldn't have worked the right way otherwise. There's all kinds of possibilities. But for me it always gets back to the idea that since it worked out for the best, it's what I was supposed to do."

"Harry," said Hermione quietly, "there are all kinds of logical flaws in that argument."

"I know. But it just feels right to me. I wouldn't try to argue it logically."

"Well," said Ron, "since this is all about life, death, fate, and all that, I guess logic doesn't have a whole lot to do with it."

"My thought exactly," agreed Harry.

Kreacher came in and announced that dinner was ready; Harry had been noticing that it smelled rather good from the other room. It was roast pork with onion and potato soup, and French bread. Harry thanked Kreacher as he, Ron, and Hermione dug in, cutting up pork and buttering bread.

"How did you feel," asked Hermione, "about this thing of Snape fancying your mother? I mean, if I were you, I'd think it was kind of creepy."

"I guess I have some feeling like that. But seeing the memories, from Snape's point of view, gave me a feeling for him that I wouldn't have had otherwise. Even though I'm glad he didn't end up with her—not

only because I wouldn't have been born—I did feel sorry for him. I could sense how painful it was for him, to want someone for all those years and never get her, and worst of all, to lose her to someone you hated, who'd treated you really badly."

"I guess I can understand that," said Hermione. "It was kind of ironic that you happened to be there when he died. If nothing else, you could grant him his one last wish."

"What? What do you mean?"

"I mean, when he asked you to look at him."

"Oh, that," said Harry. "I didn't understand that, I wondered why he did that."

She gave him a look that told him he should have known, but her tone was solemn. "Harry, everyone's always told you that you have your mother's eyes. He told you to look at him. He wanted the last thing he saw in life to be your mother's eyes. He saw her, in you, when you looked at him."

A chill rushed through Harry. He realized he should have thought of it, but it simply hadn't occurred to him. Not sure what to say, he said nothing, taking a bite of his food instead.

"But then, why was Snape so horrible to Harry all those years?" asked Ron.

"From what I saw in the memories, and things he said to me, he saw me as if I was my father. Like, he'd accuse me of being arrogant, which is pretty funny. I may be many things, but I'm not arrogant. But it was strange, how he wanted to keep me safe because my mother would have wanted it, but he treated me badly, which my mother definitely wouldn't have wanted. So, I'm not sure I get that."

Hermione shrugged. "Right now, even you can't understand why you feel the way you do. So, maybe it's not so strange that Snape, loving your mother but hating your father, might act in certain ways that

seem contradictory.” Harry nodded, feeling that it made sense, at least a little. He knew he would probably never truly understand.

Ron changed the topic. “Harry, have you asked Dumbledore—I mean, the one in the portrait—“

“It’s probably better to call the one in the portrait ‘Albus,’ since he wants to be called that anyway, and the one that we knew as ‘Prof—“

“Professor Dumbledore, got it,” Ron cut in. “Have you asked Albus whether he knows about, or remembers, the talk you had with him when you almost died?”

Harry shook his head. “I’ve thought about it, actually, but I’ve decided I’m not going to ask. I think the answer would be ‘no,’ but I don’t think that would prove anything. I’d rather just leave it a mystery.

“So, let me ask you guys the question I don’t want anyone asking me,” said Harry humorously. “What are you going to do, from now? Hermione?”

“I don’t know. I seem to be in demand right now, but... I’d kind of like to get my N.E.W.T.s, although I’m not sure how I’d do it. Something about going to Hogwarts next year really doesn’t appeal to me. No offense to Ginny and Luna, but I don’t want to be their classmate. I’ve thought about doing it by independent study; some of them can definitely be gotten that way. I’m just not sure yet.”

“There must be jobs you can get right now.”

“That’s true,” she acknowledged. “I didn’t mean I had to get my N.E.W.T.s, just that I’d like to. It was a goal for so long, it’s kind of hard to let go of. You must know what I mean; you’ve wanted to be an Auror for a while. I know you’re not thinking about it now, but you must’ve had a twinge of something when Hestia said you’d be sure to make Auror if you tried.”

Harry paused. “Maybe a little twinge.”

“Good man,” said Ron. “Admit that twinge. We won’t tell anyone.”

“But yes,” continued Hermione, “I’ve been told by people at the Ministry that a—I should say, ‘Merlin First’ is shorthand for people who got the Order of Merlin, First Class—I’ve been told that there’s no way that a Merlin First is ever going to have a hard time getting a job, even if they have no skills—“

“Are you talking about me?” interjected Ron with mock annoyance; Harry grinned as Hermione gave him an exasperated look.

“As I was saying,” she went on, “the prestige is really high. Many companies would be happy to hire Ron or me just to be able to say that they employ, for example, ‘Ron Weasley, Order of Merlin First Class recipient.’”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that too,” said Ron. “A few people, department heads, have said to me, if you want to join the Ministry, you can have this or that position, which usually takes a few years to get. But there’s something I don’t understand. If a Merlin First is so prestigious, why doesn’t the Ministry give them out like they were candy? To the Minister’s friends, political supporters, and so on?”

“Because,” replied Hermione, “the Council of Elders has to approve them.”

“Ah,” Ron said, nodding. “That would do it. I hate to think how many Fudge would have given out if he could’ve.”

“You know, Harry,” said Hermione, “I was also told that there was a group of people who tried to get the Council to give you one—when you were one year old.”

Harry laughed at the absurdity of the notion. “That’s really silly.”

“People were extremely excited about it, at that time,” she pointed out. “But yes, I agree, of course. Anyway, I’m not worried about a job. I guess I’m like you on this—not that I don’t want to think about it, but that when the right thing comes along, I’ll know it.”

“As for me,” said Ron, “much as I long to get my N.E.W.T.s, which as you know has been my long-cherished goal—”

“Oh, shut up,” retorted Hermione.

“I suppose I’m content to live on my hundred Galleons a month for now, and also not make any decisions so quickly. Not that I wouldn’t consider joining the Ministry at some point, but it just isn’t the kind of thing that gets me excited. Don’t know if I’m cut out for influence trading.”

“I hope not,” said Harry. “It’s strange... the three of us, sitting here, out of Hogwarts. I mean, when we were on the run, there was always so much stress, pressure, feeling of ‘what are we going to do now,’ that even though it was boring a lot of the time, we couldn’t relax. Now, we’re relaxing, not at Hogwarts. It just... like I said, feels strange. Like we’re not where we should be.”

“Do you ever feel satisfied, because Voldemort’s gone?” asked Hermione.

“You’d think I would,” Harry agreed. “It feels like I should. And I’m glad he’s gone, but... no, I really don’t have that feeling you’re talking about. I guess that throughout my life, especially my time at Hogwarts, I’ve always felt as though the next crisis was just around the corner, because it almost always was. It’s like, I can’t let down my guard. Who knows, maybe that’s what’s causing me to be weird like I am. I just keep feeling like something else is going to happen.”

“I don’t know, it feels like it’s something more that’s causing this,” suggested Hermione. “Something deeper.” Harry shrugged, unable to think of anything more to say about it.

She spoke again, compassion in her voice. “Harry... you really don’t get any enjoyment from being a hero?”

He shook his head. “I’ve been a hero, all my life. At least, I’ve had people treat me as if I was one. You know I never liked it.”

“Yes, but now you actually are one. That doesn’t make it different?”

“Doesn’t seem to. Kingsley said more or less the same thing, when he made me breakfast, but... I’m glad that what I did, what we did, has helped wizarding society so much... but that’s about it.”

“Do you feel that you have a real connection to society?” she asked.

“I never thought about it that way before,” he said, mulling it over. “I suppose not, but... that’s interesting. Maybe I don’t trust the support I get now, because I know things can turn on you in a second, even if you didn’t do anything. Everyone thought I was the Heir of Slytherin in second year, that I put my name into the Goblet in fourth year, that I was lying about Voldemort coming back... I know that things can change. I guess at Hogwarts, I got used to the idea that the only ones I could really trust were you two.” He hadn’t meant for it to sound maudlin, but it was true, and he didn’t want to not say it just because of how it sounded.

“Oh, Harry,” said Hermione, her eyes misting up. “Thank you...” She reached over and took his right hand, holding it for a few seconds.

Ron looked affected as well. “Thank you, Harry,” he said simply.

Harry nodded. “Well, anyway... so maybe I don’t feel like I have that much of a connection to society. Why did you ask, anyway? It’s kind of a strange question.”

“It was because of something Ron said yesterday. He said that with what he’s doing, he felt more connected to wizarding society than he ever had before. I suppose I do too, even though I’m not working with as many people as he is. It’s a shame that you don’t get to feel that way, because I have a feeling that wizarding society feels pretty connected to you.”

“Yeah, but how long would that last? I mean, one Rita Skeeter article, and everyone’s back to thinking I’m crazy.”

“Well, first of all, Rita Skeeter isn’t going to be writing anything about us if she knows what’s good for her,” said Hermione smugly. “Normally she’d be all over this, but she hasn’t written a thing about it.

But secondly, I think your standing is high enough that it would take more than that. I mean, not that I blame you for feeling that way, but the people who thought that about you before, first, were kids, and second, didn't know you. So I understand, but I don't think it would be like that."

After a long silence, Harry said, "I don't know. You could be right. I just have a hard time feeling that way."

"Well, I think at some point, you will start getting out there and meeting people, talking to them," said Ron. "And when they talk to you, and get to know who you are, they'll start dealing with Harry Potter, the person, rather than Harry Potter, the hero. It just might take some time."

Hermione seemed impressed by Ron's thought. "I agree, that makes sense. Well, anyway, one day at a time. We do think that you really deserve the time off that you're getting."

Harry tried not to smile. "Does that also mean that I deserve to have your mother stop trying to tell me what to do?"

Ron grinned. "Sorry, mate, but you're on your own there. Can't ask for miracles, after all."

"Guess I should know better," he agreed.

They stayed for another two hours, and he felt better than he had since Voldemort had died. As he talked to them, it occurred to him that he was very lucky, and happy that they'd gotten through the last year in one piece. They were his friends, but they also felt like family, more than anything else he had.

* * * * *

The next morning at breakfast, Harry realized that he hadn't asked anyone the day before if there was any news about the goblin situation. The Prophet delivered it: the main article said that the goblins had announced that Gringotts would close, and remain closed, until the new bank was shut down. The article quoted Bill as saying,

“This doesn’t change anything; it only means that they’re no longer pretending to allow people to get to their money. They’ve just found a new thing to blame it on, but as Harry said, this bank wouldn’t have been necessary if the goblins hadn’t cut wizards off from Gringotts.” Bill went on to say that the bank would stay open regardless of the disposition of Gringotts’ dispute with the Ministry, and that events clearly showed that a choice in banking was necessary.

Also reported on the front page was that Kingsley would now negotiate with the goblins personally. One editorial criticized him for doing so, saying that it amounted to appeasing blackmailers, while another said he should have done it sooner. I guess this is good for him, thought Harry, he gets to appear in the middle of the issue. The second editorial suggested that Kingsley had decided to negotiate because he wanted people to feel he was trying to do something to get their gold back, and that he chose this time because now that there was another bank, he could negotiate from a position of greater strength.

In the morning’s mail, there was a letter from a Witch Weekly reporter, but not the one who had aborted the article on Hermione’s parents. It said that the magazine was planning to do a cover story and article on the Weasley family, and would like to arrange an interview with him in the next two days. If he agreed, he could write back with the date and time.

He sighed and leaned back in the chair. He glanced up at Dumbledore’s portrait, which was empty. This request was very annoying to Harry, because while he strongly preferred not to give interviews unless absolutely necessary, it would look very bad if he declined comment for an article which would obviously highlight the Weasleys’ positive qualities. Ron would understand, thought Harry, but the others might not, especially Ginny and Molly. Just great, another thing I don’t want to do, but really have to do. Resignedly, he dashed off a quick note in reply, saying that he would talk to them the next day, at four p.m. I’m not saying anything about the past year, though.

Also in the mail were two Quidditch-related offers: one from Oliver Wood, who said that their Seeker was retiring after the next season

and that Harry could be practically guaranteed the starting position if he tried out, and one from the manager of the Chudley Cannons, with an invitation of a tryout and an offer of Top Box tickets to the forthcoming Quidditch World Cup, this year to be held in America. No thanks, he thought, setting the letters aside. Wonder how you travel from country to country, he thought absently. He'd seen the end of such journeys when the Triwizard tournament was held, but there had to be quicker and more efficient ways.

The mail finished, he thought about what he should do that day. He thought about the box upstairs, and thought it might be interesting to have a go at deciphering the functions of some of the artifacts that Dumbledore had left him. Not because he wanted to use them, but for the challenge of it. He wondered if Dumbledore had left cryptic instructions for that very reason. He'd never been very interested in brain teasers, but they were a lot more appealing when you had a lot of time, and nothing specific to do.

Acting on another impulse, he decided to invite Dudley over to do it with him. Partly to be nice, he thought, and partly because it was a good thing to do while talking to someone. He decided, however, that he wouldn't do it if it involved going to the Burrow; he still preferred to avoid Molly for the time being. He Apparated to Dudley's Muggle apartment, where he found Dudley, whom he Apparated back to Grimmauld Place. He told Dudley that he'd Apparate them back when they were done, but Dudley explained that Molly had had Ron set up a Portkey between the Burrow and his apartment.

To Harry's surprise, Dudley asked, "Are you not talking to Molly right now?"

Harry hesitated, not sure how much he could trust Dudley not to repeat what he said. "I'd say I'm taking a break from her. I just don't want to get mad and blow up at her. She seems not to know how to lay off."

Dudley nodded. "She mentioned it yesterday, when I asked something that had to do with you. She said, 'I think Harry doesn't want my help right now.'"

Annoyed, Harry rolled his eyes. "Her 'help?' That's what she calls it?"

Dudley shrugged. "Seems to be a common thing with mothers."

"Yeah, but she's not my mother."

"I get the impression that she adopted you, in her mind, at least. But I can see what you mean. She's constantly telling me, you should do this or that. The difference is that with me, I actually need someone telling me that, at least right now. So, I don't mind."

"Guess it's good for you," Harry agreed. "You're someone she can mother, and you can use it. Maybe her own kids are getting too old, but she can't get out of the habit. Oh, you know, they're probably going to want to interview you for this magazine article they're doing."

"Yeah, they already did."

Oh, great, Harry thought, I hope he didn't say anything about me.
"Really? When?"

"Yesterday, the guy was over interviewing Molly, who had told him about me. He asked me some questions about them, and some about you. Don't worry, I didn't answer the ones about you. I haven't been around here long, but I know enough to know that you wouldn't want me to. I just said the Weasleys seemed like nice people, and they'd been really helpful. I couldn't believe it, the guy knew about the toffee thing!"

"Fred or George must've told him. I'm pretty sure Ron or Arthur wouldn't have."

"I guess. I just said, no big deal, I heard they do that to everyone. Of course, it was a big deal then, but I wasn't about to tell this guy that."

"Obviously. Thanks for not talking about me, anyway."

Dudley nodded. "So, what were you thinking of doing?"

Harry Summoned the box of artifacts from the bedroom. "I thought I'd look these over, and I thought you could help me figure out what they do."

"How would I possibly know?"

"Well, it's like a puzzle. You might have ideas that I wouldn't."

"Why don't you just get Hermione over here?"

Harry chuckled. "I don't want it to be that easy."

He reached into the box and pulled out a gray cube, made of a substance that was firm but not unyielding; he had never felt anything like it before. "Save to white for a rainy day; use a little, and I'll be gray. Spend it all, I'll turn to black, but if you do, I can't come back," spoke Dumbledore's voice.

Harry and Dudley exchanged mystified looks. "Well, got any ideas?" Harry asked Dudley jokingly.

Eyes wide, Dudley shook his head. "I was never good at stuff like this."

"It talks about saving and spending," Harry mused aloud, "so it sounds like it's about money, but there doesn't seem to be anyplace to put the money." He spoke the word 'gold,' reached into his bag, and took out a Galleon. He put the Galleon on top of the cube, but nothing happened.

"Maybe you're supposed to put your wand on it, to make it work," suggested Dudley.

"Good idea," said Harry. He knew he would have thought of it himself eventually, but wanted to encourage Dudley to think in magical terms. He took out his wand and touched the tip to the Galleon on top of the cube. Nothing happened. "Save," he said. Still nothing.

He moved the wand, now touching both the Galleon and the cube directly with the wand; as soon as the wand touched the cube, he felt a mild spark; he knew he was onto something. "Save."

He was totally unprepared for what happened: he suddenly felt trapped, unable to move, and the sensation of something being pulled from him, like a vacuum cleaner, but of energy, not matter. After a few seconds, he yanked the wand away. "What happened?" asked Dudley.

Harry explained the sensation. "I feel... I don't know, tired. Like that took something out of me."

"Look," said Dudley. "It's whiter than it was."

Harry looked, and indeed, the cube was a whiter shade of gray than it had been. Suspecting what would happen, but feeling he had to be sure, he touched the cube again. "Spend."

As he had expected, the reverse effect occurred: he suddenly felt more energetic, much as he had before touching it the first time. "It turned back, I was watching it," said Dudley enthusiastically. "You feel better now?" Harry nodded.

Dudley picked it up to look at it closely. "Cool. You can use it to save energy, maybe when you feel good, than later when you need it, you can get it back. Students would use these to study before tests, stay up all night."

"Spend it all, I can't come back," repeated Harry.

"If you use all of it at once, you ruin it," said Dudley. "It doesn't work anymore."

"I guess that's to emphasize that you shouldn't use too much of it at one time," guessed Harry. "Maybe, just for emergencies." He picked up the Galleon and put it back into his bag. "Don't need this."

"Mind if I try?" asked Dudley; Harry gestured his assent. Dudley took out his wand and did as Harry had done, but as soon as his wand

touched the cube, Dumbledore's voice intoned, "I serve but one master."

Disappointed, Dudley put down his wand. "I hope they aren't all like that."

"Sorry," said Harry, trying not to grin. Now he knows how I felt all those Christmases, he thought. I can play with the toy, but he can't.

There was a noise upstairs, and Kingsley was suddenly coming down the stairs. "Hi there. What are you two up to?"

"Playing with toys," responded Harry.

"Ah, a Life Cube," said Kingsley, who then looked into the box. "And that's a—"

"Don't tell us," Harry interrupted him. "It's part of the fun, trying to figure out what they are," he said, half-joking.

Kingsley smiled. "Don't worry, I won't give it away. I don't know what half of them are, myself; a few of these are well known, but others are probably one-of-a-kind. Where'd you get them?"

The thought fleetingly occurred to Harry to be careful, as Kingsley was Minister, but he realized he shouldn't think like that. "Dumbledore."

"Ah, had them delivered," nodded Kingsley. "Yeah, most people do that. Well, knowing him, there's probably some really interesting stuff there. Consider yourself lucky I don't confiscate it."

"You'd better not," Harry joked back.

"Mind if I sit?" Harry gestured him to a chair; he and Dudley were on the sofa. "I have a couple of things to ask you. One's a favor, so I'll get that out of the way first." Wary, Harry tried to keep any expression off his face.

“We’re having distinguished visitors tomorrow. As you know, I sent Aurors to several countries to try to get information about fighting dementors. A few countries helped, especially America, and we’re having a few of their high-level people over to thank them. They specifically asked if they could meet you; apparently, what you did has made the American papers as well. Knowing how you’d feel about it, I didn’t make any promises, except that I’d ask you.”

More confused than annoyed, Harry asked, “Why do they want to meet me? What’s the point of that?”

“It could be for any number of reasons. My guess is that it’s because you’re very famous here, and people often want to meet famous people, find out what they’re like.”

“Can you tell them that what I’m like is that I don’t like to meet people for no good reason?”

“Should I take that as a ‘no’?” As Harry paused, Kingsley added, “They did help us out, and they didn’t have to. I know how you feel, but—“

“All right, all right, I’ll do it,” Harry conceded. He wondered if Kingsley was trying to make him feel guilty if he declined.

“Thank you, Harry. I appreciate it. Now, the other thing, this is something I want your opinion about. I’ve been negotiating with goblins for the better part of the day. And a charming folk they are.”

“I can definitely believe that,” replied Harry, also deadpan. “Look at that nice invitation they gave me the other day.”

“Yes, exactly. They claim that was a misunderstanding, of course. They—“

“You can forget it, I’m not going to meet them.”

Kingsley grinned. “Wouldn’t dream of asking. I was going to say, you saw today that they’re already pushing to get your bank closed. In the negotiations, they’ve made all their old demands, plus the new one,

of shutting down the bank, and having Gringotts reaffirmed as the only bank of the English wizarding world.”

“Is there some law that there’s not allowed to be any other bank except Gringotts?” asked Dudley.

“Good question,” said Kingsley. “They claim that there is, but it’s not something we recognize. They say that at the end of the last wizard-goblin conflict, about a hundred and ten years ago, the Minister of that time privately assured them that Gringotts would stay theirs, and that no banking competition would be allowed. That’s not recorded in our history, or codified in any law, but they insist it happened, and that it was witnessed by one of their leaders personally. He’s offered to show us a Pensieve memory of the conversation, but the problem is—”

“Pensieve memories can be faked,” said Harry, thinking of Slughorn.

“Exactly. They claim that the Minister told them that it couldn’t be made law right then, but that it would in the future, and of course it never was.”

Harry scoffed. “They can’t expect us to follow a law that was never official, based only on their word. And also, even if there was such a law, they shouldn’t be allowed to use that to hold us and our money hostage.”

“Of course, I said something similar, and we went back and forth about that for a while. The reason I’m here, Harry, is that I do have to consider my options. The last thing in the world I want to do is close the bank, but I may have to consider it. I’m here to ask what your reaction would be if I were to do that, how bad you would consider that to be.”

“I was thinking about this earlier, actually. I hate the idea, but if you think it’s necessary to get people’s money back, I’m not sure I could say, absolutely not. I guess in the end, I’d support whatever Bill decided.”

“Funny, he said more or less the same thing, and that he’d support whatever you decided. So, maybe you two need to get together and talk about it.”

“Maybe we should,” Harry agreed. “But I was wondering, isn’t Gringotts more or less finished anyway? I mean, if you’re a bank, people have to have confidence that you’ll be there, that you won’t run away with their money, and that they can always get their money. I mean, even if I wasn’t Undesirable No. 1 for the goblins, I’d definitely never put my gold in Gringotts again.”

“Yes, of course, I’ve had the same thought. This is really about getting people’s money out of there, first and foremost. But I’d be very surprised if much of the wizarding population was willing to put any trust in Gringotts again. To be honest—and this isn’t to be repeated—” he gave Dudley a glance, “we feel that what’s likeliest is that we strike some deal involving shutting down the bank, free repairs, a new dragon—probably a baby—and a token payment, nothing near what they’re asking for. But there’d be nothing to stop us from re-opening the bank in a few years, when everyone would have had the chance to get their money out. The goblins wouldn’t like it, but there’d be nothing they could do, and after what they’ve done now, they’ve earned it.”

Harry’s expression didn’t change, but he felt some of the same discomfort he’d felt a few weeks ago—had it really been that recently?—when he’d told Griphook what amounted to a lie in order to get his cooperation. Yet he was disinclined to judge Kingsley, since the goblins’ actions left Kingsley the choice of being dishonest with them, or allowing them to blackmail wizards any time they chose by shutting down Gringotts. Sometimes it seemed that dishonesty was defensible. Malfoy would love this, thought Harry. He’d say, of course, you moron, don’t be naïve.

“I’ve heard that people are happy with the new bank,” said Dudley. “Won’t they be angry if you shut it down?”

“Yes, they will,” agreed Kingsley. “This is one of those situations where I’ll make people unhappy no matter what I do, just different people. Anyone who has little or no money in Gringotts will prefer that

I leave the Bank of the Phoenix open, and anyone with a fair amount in Gringotts will want me to shut it down. The first group will be more numerous, but the second will be more intense in its desire, and more politically powerful. In the end, I'll probably let the politics decide it for me. I feel that for matters like this, if security isn't an issue, the collective will of the people should decide it.

"Well, I should be heading back; this is just a short break in the negotiations. You two can get back to your toys." He headed for the stairs.

"Have fun," Harry called after him.

Kingsley turned and looked at him sourly. "Don't rub it in. Remember, you can have my job any time you want it."

"No, thanks," replied Harry, as Kingsley continued up the stairs. "Now, where were we..." He picked up a flexible-looking sheet of white material that appeared to be a cross between rubber and plastic. Again, Dumbledore's voice could be heard as soon as Harry touched it. "Hide me under a bed, in a necklace, or in a fingernail; only you will find me."

"In a fingernail?" marveled Dudley. "How does that work?"

"I guess you can reduce its size magically," said Harry. He pointed his wand at it, but nothing happened. "Hmmm..."

"Well, it says you can hide it, but what's it for?" asked Dudley. "It must have a function other than being hidden, or it wouldn't make sense."

"Good point." A few minutes of thought yielded nothing.

"Well, it kind of looks like a covering," Dudley suggested. "Maybe you cover something with it..." He stood and picked up a book from the coffee table, then put it under the wrapping. Nothing seemed to happen. He then put the book on top of the wrapping, and folded the white material over it. Once it was completely covered, the wrapping seemed to take over on its own, fastening itself more securely around

the book, the edges seeming to fold into the other material. Harry picked up the package, which was emitting a soft glow of light.

“Nice job,” Harry complimented Dudley, who nodded, clearly pleased. “Definitely on the right track... but why the light?”

“What light?”

“The light that’s surrounding it.”

Dudley looked more closely, then touched it, and held it. “I don’t see anything.”

“Hmmm. Must be like the other one, something only for the owner. But you can hide it in a fingernail. Well, let’s try reducing it again.”

He pointed his wand, and this time it suddenly started shrinking; he kept shrinking it until it had the same width as a postage stamp. The light surrounding it had increased in intensity as its size decreased. “Ah, I get it now.”

“What?”

“You still don’t see anything?” Dudley shook his head. “Interesting... the reason for the light, which I guess only I can see, is so no matter how small it gets, I’ll never lose it, because the light will signal its location. Very clever.”

He reduced it until it was a millimeter wide, then put it onto the fingernail of his left index finger; he then reduced it more, until it was invisible. He pressed it into his fingernail, then held the finger upside down, then shook it, and finally banged it against the coffee table. “There’s a tiny, but bright light coming from my fingernail, which I have no trouble seeing,” he explained. “Great object. But why didn’t Dumbledore use this to hide the Sorcerer’s Stone?” Dudley’s blank look reminded him that there was still a lot Dudley didn’t know; he spent the next several minutes telling a brief version of the story.

“Maybe he didn’t have it then,” said Dudley. “Or maybe this doesn’t work with certain magical objects.”

"Anything's possible, I suppose. Well, there is one magical item I want to try it with." He increased its size until it was easily removed from the top of his fingernail, then restored it to its normal size. He Summoned the bottomless bag, as he thought of it, that he'd had Kreacher buy recently. He wrapped it, and it worked exactly as the book had. "So cool," he said enthusiastically. "This is really good if I'm carrying something that I don't want people to know I have."

"Like what?" wondered Dudley.

"I don't know. A box full of artifacts?" Harry joked. "This would've been handy a few times at Hogwarts, that's for sure."

After reversing the procedure again, he set aside the sheet, and picked up a small box. He opened it to find what at first looked like a pendant. He thought, another one? It seemed to have one chain, but two pendants, which fit together into a circle. One was in the shape of a crescent moon; the other, the rest of the circle, the part of the moon that couldn't be seen because it was dark. "Under the same moon, always together even when apart," Dumbledore's voice said. Harry pulled at the two pendants to find that there were two chains, but they appeared as one until pulled apart. He put them down, and the chains melded back together to make one.

"Hey, that's the shape the moon is now," said Dudley. "I happened to see it last night. Do you suppose the pendant changes with the cycle of the moon?"

"Wouldn't surprise me," said Harry.

Dudley nodded. "Well, I guess you won't be using this one for a while."

"Why is that?"

Dudley was surprised that Harry didn't get it. "These are two necklaces, obviously supposed to be worn by two people who are married, or lovers, or whatever. 'Together even when apart.' It must

be that they have some function that you won't know until you and another person wear them at the same time."

Impressed, Harry nodded. "That makes sense. Well, I won't find out anytime soon, then." He put the necklaces back into their box, then into the box of artifacts. Dudley looked at Harry quizzically, but didn't say anything.

They spent the next two hours going over the rest of the items, and worked out the function of all but two. Discussing them later, the necklaces were the only ones he preferred not to talk about.

* * * * *

Soon after Dudley left, Bill came over. He and Harry found that they felt much the same way: if shutting down the bank was necessary for people to get their money from Gringotts, then they would reluctantly do it. But, as Bill pointed out, the framework and paperwork for the bank would still exist, and it could be resurrected anytime in the future on short notice.

As had become his habit, Harry checked the mail again after dinner, and was surprised to find a response from Luna. Wow, he thought, that was fast, I just sent the last one yesterday morning. Guess it doesn't take the owls that long. He opened it quickly.

Dear Harry,

As before, your letter was extremely interesting. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone—even my father, I'm sure he'd love to print information like that. I don't know if he's gone back to working on the Quibbler; I hope he has. It always gave him a purpose, which he needs right now.

I feel like I'm getting to understand you more and more. I didn't know that about your childhood. Nobody did, except for the Weasleys, I guess. That probably affected you a lot, like my mother dying affected me. Maybe you didn't think so much of yourself at Hogwarts, even when you did great things, because your aunt and uncle didn't think much of you. I feel sorry for you that you had to go through something

like that, that you totally didn't deserve. I know you probably don't want pity, which is why you didn't tell most people this. Still, I can't help feeling bad for you. You didn't have people who loved you, so maybe now if someone loves you, you can't understand it well. I don't know if that factors into your current problem, but it seems like it might. Most of wizarding society loves you now—I'm using 'love' in a different way now, but I think you know what I mean—but you might feel that they don't know you well enough to, or they couldn't really love you, since nobody in your life did until much later.

People who've suffered the kind of things you did early in life, I hear, create a kind of shield that protects them from being hurt, but also keeps people out. I hope that by now, you understand that people can and do love you, especially people close to you. The only limitation on that is the extent to which you don't let them get to know you.

Again, Harry was fascinated by what he read. No one had ever spoken to him of things like this before, and he felt that what she said made a lot of sense. Was she right about how his early childhood had affected his emotional life? He didn't know, of course, but it seemed reasonable. He was very surprised at the insight she seemed to have, even though he felt he hadn't told her that much about his life overall. Especially the past year...

He suddenly wondered: if I told her what had happened in the last year, would she have any ideas about why I feel like I do these days? He was still reluctant to tell anyone, but he knew she cared about him, and that he could trust her. Not talking about it was a reflex, but he understood from what she'd written that he had a lot of reflexes, and not all of them were healthy. He had never thought about why he did some things he did, but maybe it was time to start doing so.

After reading her letter again, he took out a piece of paper, and started writing. A few hours later, an hour past his usual bedtime, he wasn't finished, but he put away the pen and paper. I'll finish it tomorrow night, he thought.

As Harry ate breakfast the next day, he read a front-page Prophet story about the situation with the dementors. The story's primary message was that people were getting tired of keeping their windows closed, of not being able to go outside except in Diagon Alley. There were several quotes from ordinary citizens expressing their impatience; one man said, "The previous governments knew how to deal with dementors, so maybe we should get a Minister who can. Shacklebolt may be a great fighter, but a Minister has to protect the citizens."

The impetus for the article was a collective request from the Hogsmeade Merchants' Association for "effective action to be taken against the dementors, or failing that, a magical shield to keep dementors out, such as exists in Diagon Alley." Business had been down drastically in many areas of the country, Portkeys notwithstanding. The article quoted an official from the Trade Department of the Ministry, saying that planning was already underway for such a shield for the business areas of Hogsmeade and other villages, and asked for patience.

Most disturbingly to Harry, the article contained anonymous quotes from fairly high up in the Ministry itself suggesting that Kingsley's approach to dealing with the dementors had significant opposition. An undersecretary was quoted as saying, "There are ways to deal with dementors, and Minister Shacklebolt knows this. He simply refuses to do anything but fight, and he is not open to debate. We need a Minister with more flexibility, subtlety, and political finesse."

Kingsley's quote in response gave no quarter. "Surrendering to one's enemies is craven weakness, not political finesse. Many accepted Voldemort's reign because it was easier and less risky for them personally even as it was disastrous for the population as a whole, especially the most vulnerable among us. This situation is not identical, but the same principle applies. We continue to work on, and refine, magical protection of open areas; we will do the same in every wizarding village if we have to. But we will not allow them to do as they please with the human population."

Finishing the article, Harry was angry with the people who were complaining about the dementors, and found himself reaching for paper and a pen. He wrote:

I have to say that I'm very disappointed that people aren't giving Kingsley and the government time to do something about the dementors, and especially that some people in the Ministry are trying to undermine what he's doing. If you're going to complain, then at least be brave enough to use your name, if you stand behind your opinion. I have no problem with what the merchants asked, though, since they didn't advocate giving in to the dementors. They just want to be safe, and I know it's the government's responsibility to do that. But just two weeks ago, we had a government that was using dementors to terrorize people they didn't like. The dementors got used to it, and they're angry now that they can't anymore. That's the fault of those who supported Voldemort, not Kingsley.

Some people asked me why I did what I did, why I risked so much and allowed my close friends to risk so much. The basic answer was that it was the right thing to do. What Kingsley's doing right now is the right thing to do. Ask yourself, would it be okay to have Voldemort back to terrorize part of the population, as long as he didn't do anything to you personally? Anyone who criticizes what Kingsley is doing is basically saying yes, that'd be okay. If you have some way to keep the dementors away while making sure that not a single person who doesn't want to be around them isn't, for God's sake tell Kingsley, and he'll do it. But if even one person is stuck near the dementors against his will, that's one too many, and it's unacceptable. I know what being near dementors feels like, and there's literally nothing worse.

I know that now it's inconvenient, it's annoying, it costs businesses money. But Kingsley is doing his best to deal with that, and it takes time. If we make a deal with the dementors, if we allow them to feast on the weak and helpless so we don't have to be inconvenienced, then it means we didn't learn anything from our experience with Voldemort. I was bad at History of Magic, but not that bad. I'm all for debating how we fight them, but let's not debate whether we should fight them.

One more thing: I think a lot of people may not know what dementors are like, haven't personally been around them. I know that many people were forced to be around them in the last year, when Voldemort was in power. I'd like to request that as many of those people as possible write to the Prophet to say what it was like, and I hope the Prophet will print all of those letters. The more you know what dementors are like, the more you'll agree that we just can't have them as any part of our society. Even if they don't attack you personally.

Well, that was longer than I thought it would be when I started, thought Harry as he looked over the two pages he had written. But, reading it again, he was satisfied with what he'd said. His experience with the Prophet over the past two weeks suggested that this would be at the top of the front page of the next day's Prophet, but that was all right. He had to do what was right.

Looking at the mail, he remembered last night's letter to Luna, which he hadn't had the chance to finish. He picked it up, read over what he'd written so far, and thought about what to say next. He wrote:

I can't seem to think about a job, but that's not such a big deal. There's no hurry to decide what I'm going to do. Professor McGonagall offered me the DADA position starting in September, and it's tempting. I like the subject, and I liked teaching it for the D.A. Of the offers I've had, it's the most appealing. (Well, except for the Aurors, but that wasn't a specific offer.) But there's just something telling me I shouldn't take it, that I shouldn't take anything. It's annoying, because I know she'll have to hire someone else, and this may not come again. But I just have to wait until I can accept it without hesitating. What I don't know is why I'm hesitating.

I also can't seem to think about a girlfriend, which is a bigger deal. You probably know that I broke up with Ginny—though we hadn't been together that long—because I was going to track down the Horcruxes, and it was necessary for her safety. She seemed to understand; she didn't have that bad a reaction. I was a little surprised that her reaction wasn't worse, to tell you the truth. But after Voldemort was dead, and I woke up the next day feeling strange, like

I still do... it seemed like she expected me to pick up where we left off, and I just felt like I couldn't do that. Again, I don't know why.

It wasn't anything she did, or said. Maybe I had to turn my emotions off when I left to do what I had to do, and it's hard to turn them back on again. Now when I think about why I liked her, it's hard to think of an answer, besides that she's pretty. She's a Weasley, she likes to fly, and isn't afraid of a fight, all of which I like and respect. But I don't feel like I know her, how she thinks, how she feels. Was that not important before, when the important thing was how it felt when she kissed me? Or is it just important now, and if so, why, if it wasn't then? It feels a little like it felt with Cho; I was really attracted to her, but I didn't really know her, either.

The first time I saw her after Voldemort was gone, I told her I needed some time. She obviously wasn't happy, but didn't argue with me. I just assumed my feelings would come back. But they haven't, and it just feels like they're not going to. But why not, if nothing's changed between us? Anyway, probably partly because I don't know why, I haven't wanted to talk about it, or think about it. Maybe I'm trying to hide it from myself. You said I didn't let people get to know me; maybe I also don't let myself get to know me. I just wish I would, because this is really annoying. It's just as well that she's at Hogwarts, because if she asked me what was going on, there's nothing I could say that wouldn't hurt her.

I've never told anyone this, even Ron and Hermione. (Of course, she's Ron's sister, so I couldn't talk to him about it anyway.) I hope you can give me some advice. Not about relationships—I don't think you have so much experience with that (at least, not that I know of)—but about understanding myself, which you seem to be good at, and I'm not.

Harry stopped writing, and read again what he'd written. He wondered if he really wanted to send it. It was far more personal than anything he'd ever put on paper, and maybe more personal than he'd ever said to anyone. But he felt that Luna really understood him, and he wanted to know what she thought. He also felt strongly that something about her engendered trust; he knew she wouldn't tell anyone what he'd said. He folded the paper and set it aside; he would

finish the letter tonight, and make a final decision on whether to send that section or not.

After a quiet early afternoon, Ron came through the fireplace at a quarter to three, as Harry was starting to get ready to go to the Ministry. “Well, you sure know how to set off a firestorm.”

“They got the letter already?”

“A few hours ago. Copies of it are flying around the place. You really didn’t like that article this morning, did you?”

“Guess you could tell. What are people saying?”

“Two main themes. One is that some people are surprised that you’re getting involved in politics—“

“I’m not trying to get involved in politics,” Harry protested.

“I know, and I told people that, but they said that by criticizing an Undersecretary, you are whether you knew it or not. The other theme is that people are ducking for cover. Even that undersecretary—he was anonymous in the article, but everyone apparently knows who he is—backed off after your letter, saying that he’s not advocating letting the dementors have their way with anyone, just that Kingsley should be investigating all possibilities.”

Harry scoffed. “That’s just a different way of saying the same thing. There are no other ‘possibilities’ than fighting them, or letting them have some people.”

“Yeah, but the point is he backed off, even if only rhetorically,” said Ron. “I just talked to Percy, and you know how he has his ear to the ground. He said he’s never seen anything like it, that it was a huge political explosion. He said that because you’re so popular and respected now, even ordinary citizens will hesitate to criticize Kingsley for a while, because they’ll be ashamed to, and politicians won’t dare do it, for fear of pissing you off. ‘Any politician who makes an enemy of Harry Potter is in deep trouble,’ he said.” Ron surveyed

Harry with amusement, obviously knowing that Harry had been totally ignorant of the effect his letter would have.

Harry read as much in Ron's face, and replied, "Well, what can I say. I'm a political genius."

Laughing, Ron responded, "I always knew it. So, what are you up to?"

Harry was suddenly very conscious of the letter on his desk that contained things he absolutely did not want Ron to read, even though it was folded and put in an out-of-the-way place. "I was just getting ready to go, actually. Kingsley wants me to meet some Americans, for some reason."

"Oh, yes, they helped with the dementors," recalled Ron. "Well, it seems reasonable, considering your letter. Reward those who helped us with your esteemed presence."

"You'd better watch out, or you'll have more of my esteemed presence than you know what to do with."

"I'm really scared. So, want to go back with me?"

"No, I thought I'd use the Portkey, avoid the gawkers. So, you just came to tell me about that?"

"Yes. Oh, no, one other thing. I was talking to Dudley earlier, and he'd found out a few things about this adult education school. The one in America, anyway, which he prefers to France. The biggest problem is that it'll cost two thousand Galleons a year, for four years. I may not take your money, but it's possible he would. I was wondering what you'd think of loaning him the money to go there."

Harry shrugged. "I'll give it to him if he wants, I have tons of it. He can pay me back if he wants, but it's no big deal."

Ron nodded. "Thought you might say that, but I didn't want to presume. I'm sure that'll help him, since I don't think his parents were going to be willing to pay for it."

“That’s for sure,” Harry chuckled. “But I’m surprised the Ministry doesn’t pay for it, since they’d want people like him to get trained.”

“Apparently the Ministry will loan you the money, but only if you don’t have relatives with enough money. Something like that, anyway.”

“Was it your idea to ask me? Doesn’t seem like something he’d think of.”

“I just thought it was a good idea,” said Ron casually, not directly answering Harry’s question, and confirming Harry’s silent speculation that the whole thing was Molly’s idea. I guess she figures that if her name is associated with it, I’ll resist it.

“Okay. Well, I’m taking the Portkey. See you later.”

Ron headed to the fireplace, and Harry walked upstairs. He grabbed the Portkey, and in a second was in Kingsley’s office.

Alone, Kingsley immediately stood. “Harry, thanks for coming. Darlene just told me that the Americans just arrived at the Foreign Ministry, so it’ll be a few minutes before they get here. While they do...” Kingsley’s face took on a more earnest look that Harry had ever seen on him. “I wanted to thank you for that letter this morning.”

Harry shrugged dismissively. “I just wrote it because I was angry. I wasn’t specifically trying to help you.”

“I figured that,” Kingsley agreed. “And I thought you probably didn’t know what the effect would be. I’ve been told by the political people that you just single-handedly bought me two months or so of not being hassled about this, which is a lot, considering the other hassles I have. But it meant a lot partly because of that, and partly because it obviously comes from the same emotional place it comes from with me. It’s nice to have somebody with you when you’re trying to do the right thing.”

“No problem,” said Harry, not knowing what else to say.

Grinning, Kingsley added, "Also, I wish I could write the kind of letter you did, where you just let it fly. I have to think about politics, who I'm going to piss off by doing this or that. I envy you that you don't have to think about that, at least for now."

"What do you mean, 'at least for now?'"

"There will come a time in the future," said Kingsley in a slightly exaggerated world-weary tone, "when it will really matter what people think of you, what your image is. You'll find yourself editing your words before you speak, thinking about who you'll annoy by saying this or that. You'll look back on this time and think, 'it was nice when I was young and naïve, and could say anything I wanted. I wish I were there again.'"

Harry raised his eyebrows; he never would have thought of such a thing. "All I can say is, I hope you're wrong."

"I hope I am, too," said Kingsley as the door to his office opened; Darlene ushered in three men in blue robes. "Gentlemen, thank you for coming. Kingsley Shacklebolt, and this is Harry Potter."

The three Americans introduced themselves and handshakes were given all around. "It's very nice to meet you two," said the American who was their senior Auror. "I've heard a lot about how both of you fought... what's his name..."

"Voldemort," supplied Harry. Turning to Kingsley, he added, "You know, we should have called him that. Instead of calling him You-Know-Who, we should have just called him What's-His-Name. I could have lived with that."

Kingsley laughed, and explained the taboo of Voldemort's name to the Americans. "Harry's evidently been on a little crusade on the subject."

"All it did was build him up, make him seem like more than he was."

"Yes, I definitely agree," said the senior Auror. "You don't want to encourage their delusions of grandeur. We had a Dark wizard a

dozen years back who would kill people for mispronouncing his name.”

“Wow,” said Harry. “You should have just called him, ‘He-Whose-Name-Must-Not-Be-Mispronounced.’” Again, Kingsley chuckled, and explained the reference to the Americans.

“That wouldn’t have been a bad idea,” agreed the amused Auror. “But most people just took to leaving a few seconds of silence where his name would have been. Many of us mispronounced it on purpose, on principle, but a few of those who did were killed. One has to wonder at the psychology of the deviant, criminal mind. It obviously involves a healthy ego.”

“I guess so,” said Harry. “Voldemort seemed to have been born with it, though. I saw some memories of him as a child, and he was almost the same way he’d been as an adult. Maybe some people are just born bad.”

“You saw memories?” asked a surprised Kingsley. “How did—“

They were interrupted by a blaring siren. “What’s that?” Harry shouted.

“It means the magical protection has gone down,” replied Kingsley, speaking equally loudly. “Diagon Alley has been breached by dementors.”

“That should be impossible!” shouted one of the Americans.

Harry was amazed that no one was moving. “What are we standing around for? Let’s go!” Harry tried to Apparate, and failed.

“You can’t Apparate out from here, you have to go outside the outer office,” said Kingsley. “Excuse us, gentlemen.” He and Harry started to run, and were followed by two of the Americans. “We’ll go with you, just escort us by Apparition,” said one as they ran. “We’re out of practice, but we can do Patronuses.”

"Sounds good," agreed Kingsley; in a second, they had dashed by Darlene and were out the door. Harry grabbed the arm of the American closest to him, the Auror, and Disapparated.

They were in Diagon Alley, in front of Florean Fortescue's shop. Looking around, he heard a scream a few dozen meters away. "This way!" he shouted to the American, who followed close behind.

On the way, they were intercepted by a half dozen dementors; Harry thought about winning the Quidditch Cup and said the incantation. The stag followed Harry's instructions on where to attack, and he saw the other man's Patronus, a large, shaggy dog, join his. Is that a St. Bernard, Harry couldn't help but wonder. Interesting Patronus.

They continued making their way forward, soon reaching Madam Malkin's clothing shop, from which Harry was sure he'd heard the scream. Closing the door behind the pursuing dementors, Harry looked ahead to see the American already running into the back room; he dashed ahead to help.

The St. Bernard was shooing the two dementors away from the three terrified women who had been backed into a corner of the room; clothes and racks were strewn everywhere, as Harry imagined they had been used in desperate attempts to slow or distract the dementors. Harry's stag helped herd the dementors out of the room. One of the dementors tried to glide away, towards a corner of the main shop area, but Harry's stag rushed behind it, pushing it towards the door again. When the dementors were almost at the door, the American flung it open with his wand. A half dozen were waiting at the door, but they were pushed back by the two Patronuses, along with their comrades who had recently been inside.

Urged by the Auror to check the windows, Harry did; finding two open, he quickly closed them with his wand. The Auror met him in the middle of the room; they exchanged nods, indicating that all was secure. "Where to?" asked the man.

Harry took his arm and Apparated them to the area near the main Diagon Alley fireplace, where they saw a few dozen wizards, half wearing crimson Auror robes, and their Patronuses pushing

dementors away. Deciding that the area was well covered, Harry started running, looking through windows into shops. “Most shops should have Portkeys, so it should be okay,” Harry said to the Auror as they ran.

They found no one else in trouble, and after a minute, they saw Kingsley and the other American down the street. “It’s okay, Harry,” shouted Kingsley. “The shield is back up, at least for the moment.”

Harry shouted his acknowledgment, and turned to the Auror. “Thanks for the help.”

The man smiled. “No problem. We’ll send you a bill.”

Harry chuckled as a small boy ran up to him. “You’re Harry Potter!” he shouted excitedly. “My Dad and I were shopping, and I got one of these!”

He held out a small card, and Harry saw to his surprise that it was a Chocolate Frog card, with his picture on it. His eyebrows went high as he wondered why he hadn’t heard about it from the company.

“Could you sign it?” asked the boy, who looked to Harry to be about ten years old. Wow, he looks so young, Harry thought.

“Okay. Are you going to Hogwarts next year?” Harry asked. He took the proffered card, and Diagon Alley started to spin, then disappear. He had no time to register his new surroundings before a hard blow to the back of his head knocked him out.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 10, The Crucible: Captured by goblins, Harry is interrogated—under goblin truth serum, which causes enormous pain when answers aren’t forthcoming—by an old goblin who seems as interested in persuading Harry of his own guilt as he is in getting information.

From Chapter 10: “My life has been one long string of things that happened to me that I couldn’t control, or things I was called upon to

do because there was no choice. It wouldn't exactly be right to say that I have no preference, but after a while you get resigned to the idea that things happen that you can't control. I go through all kinds of hell and problems to try to save my society, manage to do it, then this happens because I had to do something that hurt your society while trying to save mine. It's like, you can't win. So, to hell with it. You'll do what you'll do."

Chapter 10

The Crucible

Thirty minutes later, Kingsley was at the Burrow, in the living room with Hermione, Fleur, Dudley, and every Weasley except Charlie and Ginny. “Well?” asked Ron impatiently, a sentiment obviously shared by all present.

“There’s no proof yet, but it had to be the goblins,” said Kingsley, grim with what, his personal affection for Harry aside, was the most serious crisis of his young Ministership. “The kid is innocent, or if he’s not, he’s an incredible actor. The guy pretending to be his father, must have been Polyjuiced, Disapparated as soon as Harry was gone; he evidently gave the kid the card—a fake Chocolate Frog card of Harry—and told him to get Harry’s autograph. He must’ve activated the Portkey to go when the next person touched it.”

“And the breaching of the dementor shield,” asked Arthur, “was done just as a ruse, to get Harry?”

“We can’t know. The best guess is that it was hoped that it would have the effect of getting Harry out there. We’ll be investigating exactly who knew Harry would be in the Ministry, just in case; it makes sense to assume that the timing was deliberate. Also, Harry, being distracted by the incident, would have been expected to be less on his guard for something like that. Very clever, to have a kid do it. I myself might have taken the card.”

“How was the shield breached?” asked Bill.

“We’ll be investigating that as well,” said Kingsley. He wanted to keep as private as possible one of the most disturbing facts regarding the incident: at least one Auror previously thought to be loyal was not, as the Diagon Alley protection contained a magical ‘lock’ known only to certain Aurors. “If we need to use Veritaserum, we will. Not finding out isn’t an option.”

“And now for the obvious question,” said Ron, “when are we going to get him back? If there’s an assault, just tell me, I’ll be there.”

Hermione put a hand on Ron's shoulder, showing her support and agreement.

Kingsley sighed. "I agree with the sentiment, but it's far from simple. You just can't get into Gringotts; that's the whole point of the place. The first thing I did was give the order for the siege to begin. What's worse is that we can't prove that's where he is, though it's by far the best bet. We have no choice but to operate under the assumption that he's in Gringotts. We will get in, there's no question of that. But it's not going to be fast."

"What will they do to him?" asked a worried Hermione.

"I was going to ask Bill the same question, as he's more of a goblin expert than I am," said Kingsley. "Bill?"

"I'm not sure," said Bill gravely. "If their recent behavior is any indication, they won't hold back on whatever it is they're thinking of doing. They've burned their bridges with us, and they must know that. They might kill him, they might torture him." Hermione visibly winced. "And before I forget... we need to, right away, go to Grimmauld place to continue this conversation. I'll explain when we get there."

One by one they went through the fireplace, until all were in Harry's home. Kingsley explained what had happened to an outraged Kreacher. "Kreacher," asked Ron, "can you go to him?"

"Kreacher is very sorry, Ron Weasley, but no. Kreacher cannot know where Master Harry is. Kreacher can come only if Master Harry calls. Master Harry, please call!"

"If Harry calls him, can Kreacher give him a Portkey?" asked Ron.

Kingsley shook his head. "They'll be expecting it, Ron. They know what house-elves can do. If Harry calls Kreacher, Kreacher will be dead in five seconds, probably less. They'll have something set up."

"Master Harry, please call!" shouted Kreacher plaintively, looking up.

"Kreacher, he's probably unconscious," said Kingsley.

“Kreacher, didn’t you hear what he said?” pleaded Hermione. “If you go, you’ll die! Harry wouldn’t want that, so you shouldn’t go!”

Kreacher looked at her disdainfully. “Harry Potter’s... close friend of disadvantaged birth does not understand. To die to help a master, especially an honored master, is the best-wished way for a house-elf to die. Kreacher is old, Kreacher is ready to go. Kreacher could not hope for a better death.”

Hermione gave Ron a look that suggested that he should say or do something; he looked back at her with a ‘what do you expect me to say?’ expression. Frustrated, she looked away.

Bill spoke again. “I had us come here because assuming they interrogate Harry, which they almost certainly will, they’re likely to ask him where the money is, and how to get at it. It might not do them much good, because only the owner can open the wall, but they might try anyway. They might be able to get the house’s location from him, and break the Fidelius Charm.”

“Harry Potter will not tell filthy goblins the home’s location,” said Kreacher firmly.

“They could give him Veritaserum, Kreacher. He may not have a choice. Will you come to the Burrow and let us know if anyone who’s not authorized gets into the home?” Kreacher nodded vigorously.

“I assume you know, Bill,” said Kingsley, “that you and Fleur are the next likely targets.” Bill nodded. “The goblins are almost certainly not doing this themselves, but by hiring mercenaries, probably some of the people the Aurors are looking for now. Also, the people working at the bank with you need to be careful.” Bill used his wand to open the vault in the wall; it was unchanged, all of the money still there.

“And speaking of the bank, that’s the next question,” continued Kingsley. “They’re likely to demand that the bank be closed, and/or any variation on that. They could demand the money itself; they could demand that I take an Unbreakable Vow not to allow any bank other

than Gringotts—you get the idea—and say they'll kill Harry if we don't do it. We need to decide how we'll answer any such demand."

"Well, it would depend on what the demand is," suggested Hermione.

Kingsley shook his head. "It doesn't work that way. You agree to one demand, they inch it up, and so forth. You have to agree to everything, or nothing. Believe me, I know."

"Then you have to agree," said Molly. "We can't let him die. Even three million Galleons isn't worth his life."

Ron looked as though he hated to say it, but said, "Harry wouldn't want us to agree to any of their demands."

There was a short silence. "Are you sure?" asked Fleur.

Ron exchanged a look with Hermione; she looked down, despondent. "Yes, we're sure," she said. "We know him better than anyone. It wouldn't matter what the demand was, he wouldn't want us to, on principle." She looked up at Fleur. "We know how stubborn he can be."

"Also," added Ron, "he said recently that after what happened in the forest, he's not afraid of dying, that he's sure there's something there. And I believe he was serious about that."

"So we should just let him die?" demanded Molly.

"You think I'm happy about it?" Ron loudly shot back at his mother. "We spent most of the last year trying to keep him alive! I'm not saying what I want, I'm saying what he would want!"

Kingsley looked everyone over. "I wanted to get your opinion first, especially Ron and Hermione, but there are security considerations as well. Giving in to this sort of thing invites more of it.

"Now, we will negotiate, but quietly. Publicly, it'll be, 'you give us back Harry, and we won't destroy Gringotts,' like that, but if they choose to do it quietly, we'll talk to them. If there's a deal in which we get him

back in a way that we can live with, we'll do it. I'm not giving up on him, by any stretch. But we can't be giving in to unilateral demands."

"What's the endgame for the goblins?" asked Arthur, looking at Bill.

Bill shrugged. "They've been acting so strangely lately, it's almost hard to say. None of this makes rational sense, so it could be anything. It's like they've all gone crazy."

Kingsley spoke again. "We also need someone to be here twenty-four hours a day. Not to defend the house—we'll set up special defenses that will keep anyone but authorized people out—but to keep an eye on Kreacher. If Harry calls him—"

"Will Harry call him?" asked Arthur. "Will it occur to Harry that they would anticipate it, and that they'd prepare for it?"

Ron and Hermione exchanged a look. "I don't think so," said Ron.

"We can't be sure, but yes, I'd doubt it," agreed Hermione. She looked at Kreacher, who suddenly seemed much happier.

"Ron, Hermione, this is very serious," said Kingsley. "How likely is Harry to call Kreacher?"

"I'd say, fairly likely," replied Ron. "He definitely knows that Kreacher can do it. As soon as it occurs to him, I think he'll do it, if he's alone."

"He might do it within a day, maybe tonight," added Hermione. "It's hard to know, but that's my best guess."

Kingsley nodded. "Okay, then." He crouched to one knee, to come closer to looking Kreacher in the eye. "Kreacher, there's something we can do that could mean that if Harry calls you, and you die, your death would have a good purpose."

Kreacher nodded eagerly. "Kreacher wants to know what this is."

"There's a liquid we can give you," said Kingsley. "You'd drink a certain amount of it every day. It'll put something in your body that we

can detect by magical sensors, the same way the Ministry detects magic being done all over the country. If you go to Harry, we'll know where he is, even if it's surrounded by shields, and the substance could help us get to him. Nothing is certain, but it increases the chances from zero to something reasonable."

"Kreacher will do it! Drink now!"

"Wait, there's more," said Kingsley gravely. "This substance is poisonous. After about three days, there'd be enough in your system that your death would be inevitable. After seven to ten days, you'd die."

"Kingsley!" gasped a shocked Hermione. "He's a living being!"

"Kreacher will do it! Drink now!"

"He has a choice, Hermione," pointed out Kingsley. "He's not our servant."

"But he's Harry's! He feels he has to do this, for Harry!"

Ron took Hermione's hand and looked at her; she had never seen him look more serious. "Hermione. I would do it. Would you?"

Trying to control her emotions, she closed her eyes for a few seconds. "Yes, I would," she admitted. "But would his reason be the same as ours?"

"Close enough, I think," said Ron.

"Master Harry is great master, worthy successor to Master Regulus," pronounced Kreacher. "Kreacher is proud to die for Master Harry."

"Yeah," said Ron. "Close enough."

"All right, we can't waste any time," said Kingsley. "I'm going back to the Ministry, get that liquid prepared, since for all we know he could call Kreacher at any time, and I'll have Hestia start preparing the magical safeguards for the house." He Disappeared.

Bill looked around. "Okay. Like Kingsley said, someone has to be around here all the time, and most of us have jobs, or are busy in some way. Dudley, you're the only one here who doesn't fit that description. Would you be willing to spend the day here when no one else is?"

Dudley nodded somberly. "Sure."

"Okay, we'll work out a schedule. Mum or Fleur might come by sometimes to keep you company, or just be around in general. Ron and Hermione, it'll probably be better if you can spend most of your non-working time here, including sleeping here. No offense to Dudley, but the more magically trained people we have here, the better." They nodded their acknowledgement.

The meeting was over, for the time being. Ron and Hermione walked over to the corner of the room which contained Harry's writing desk and Dumbledore's portrait. "Do you think we'll get him back?" she asked quietly.

Ron nodded. "He's Harry Potter. He's survived a lot. He'll survive this."

She leaned into him; he put his arms around her. "I really hope you're right."

"I am," he responded. I hope, he added to himself.

* * * * *

Harry tugged at the ropes that bound him before he fully regained consciousness; the realization that he couldn't move his arms propelled him to wakefulness in an instant. His next realization was that his head really hurt.

He saw movement out of the corner of his eye, but when he looked up, no one was there. Had someone Disapparated, or taken a Portkey?

Looking around, he realized that he was in a Gringotts vault; he knew what they looked like, and he recognized the large, metal door. He just wasn't used to seeing it from this angle.

He was sitting on the floor, his arms at his sides, bound by thick rope whose gray color made it look more like steel; the rope was fastened securely to a peg in the floor on either side. His legs, pointing forward, were held at the ankles in the same way. Anger flooded him as he realized what had happened, and he cursed himself for not having been more careful. Was that even a real boy, he wondered, or a goblin using their equivalent of Polyjuice Potion?

So, what happens now? Do they put me on trial, hold me for ransom, kill me, what? Everybody wants me for something, just in this case, it's something bad. Well, to hell with them. I'm not cooperating.

The idea that they would kill him for not cooperating flashed through his mind, and he immediately realized that he didn't care. If the choice was his, he'd go on living, but if that was the way it happened, then so be it. He'd be with his parents, Sirius, and Remus, and that wasn't so bad. The knowledge gave him strength and determination; whatever happened would be on his terms, even if he was a prisoner.

He found himself thinking about Molly, and his resistance to the 'help' she tried to give him. He wondered if it was the same thing, that he felt he had to be the one to decide what he would and wouldn't do.

His musings were halted by the sudden appearance of a goblin, though there was no Apparition sound accompanying it. He was perhaps three and a half feet tall, about average for a goblin. He was clearly very old; his face contained so many wrinkles that it reminded Harry of a prune. He had the usual pointed ears and long, sharp nose of a goblin, though both were longer than usual. He wore an ornate gold robe with intricate designs made largely with gemstones. He regarded Harry silently.

Harry decided to be the first to speak. "Let me out of these," he said, looking at the bonds, careful not to make it sound like a plea.

The goblin stared impassively. "Why should I?"

Harry would make a concession, but on his terms. "If you let me out of these, I promise not to try to escape, or to attack you or anyone in this room."

Now the goblin's eyebrows rose slightly, his face resuming its normal appearance almost instantly. Harry got the impression that this goblin wanted to betray no expression, and had reacted in spite of himself. "You already cannot escape, or attack anyone. I see no reason to agree to your request."

Harry stared at the goblin. "If you release me, I'll be... less uncooperative than I will be if you don't."

Again, the goblin gave no reaction. "What is your name?"

Harry decided not to answer, and immediately felt a sharp pain in his foot, as though a muscle had cramped. The feeling spread, working up his shin to his calf, and intensified; he involuntarily yanked his leg against the rope as his body told him that it wanted to stand in an effort to relieve the pain. He gasped in pain as the sensation reached his thigh, and started to work down his other leg.

"Answer the question. What is your name?"

Through the pain, Harry suddenly understood that the pain would stop if he answered the question, and he became intensely determined not to, no matter how painful it got. Answering on their terms is unacceptable, he thought, and I won't do it. Memories of what he had suffered in Umbridge's detentions flashed through his mind.

Even so, he felt the words almost slipping out of him. "H—" He shut his mouth tightly, and then screamed out in pain as his stomach seemed to tie in a tight knot. He felt a burning sensation in his foot, and as he gasped in pain again from the cramping, the burning started to spread as well. He realized that the burning pain would follow the same pattern; he loudly moaned as the pain continued to escalate.

“Is your name a state secret?” asked the goblin, who seemed amused, though his expression was unchanged, his tone even.

Harry now screamed loudly as powerful cramping and burning consumed almost all of his body, reaching his head. He yanked at the ropes, and again felt the impulse to answer the question, but screamed in pain instead, and continued to scream. He remembered how it had felt under the Cruciatus Curse; this pain was starting to approach that. Part of him told himself to answer the question, but part still refused, and he was using all of his breath to scream, so it would have been difficult anyway.

He had a sudden inspiration: stop breathing, he told himself. He quickly discovered that it was easier thought than done; even though he wanted not to breathe, his body did so anyway. Pain propelling him, he tried harder; at the end of a scream he refused to breathe as his body insisted he do so. He failed this time as well, but had been able to go longer than the last time. He wondered if he would die, or just pass out; part of him hoped he would die, as the pain was so bad. He tried again, trying even harder, willing himself into the abyss that he had visited once before.

* * * * *

The next thing he knew, he was in the same position as he had been before, but in considerable discomfort. His wrists were raw from struggling against the rope, and his muscles were very sore. Well, at least it worked, he thought with satisfaction. But they can just do it again, and again, until I finally decide to talk. Who knows, maybe I'll get lucky and die. Now, there's a morbid thought. But I didn't give in to Umbridge, and I'm not giving in to this. I didn't go running to McGonagall; I dealt with her on my own terms, and I'll do it here.

The same goblin suddenly appeared, and Harry felt a flash of fear at the prospect of the pain he knew was coming, but he shut down the fear with steely determination. Ron and Hermione always complained that I was stubborn, he thought wryly.

“What is your name?” asked the goblin.

Silent, Harry felt the pain begin the same way it had before. Fiercely turning his mind to his aim, Harry tolerated the pain until, after several minutes, he again passed out.

It happened exactly the same way a third time, then a fourth time. The fifth time, instead of asking Harry his name, the goblin asked, "How long will you continue to do this?" Harry again refused to answer, and again endured the pain until he was finally able, through his screams, to pass out. Each time, it felt as though he would die just before he did; the fifth time, his last thought was that he would probably be unable to do it if he were not genuinely willing to die.

The same thought came to him as he woke up the next time. Now greatly in pain even without whatever was causing the cramping and burning, he nevertheless managed a chuckle at the thought that he could now say to Draco that the walk into the forest had done him some good. The first time you choose to die is the hardest.

He reflexively raised his arm to work out the stiffness, and suddenly realized that his bonds were gone. He grinned. I won, at least for now. He stretched his muscles, rubbing the sorest ones.

The goblin appeared as suddenly as he had every time, and spoke. "Our doctor tells me that you may die if this continues," he said, betraying no emotion. "I do not wish you dead at this time, so I have agreed to your request."

I'm not sure I can say the same about you, Harry thought angrily, getting to his feet slowly and gingerly. "I'm sorry to take away your entertainment," he said contemptuously. "I didn't know that goblins were sadists."

This got a reaction: anger, quickly controlled. "It is the ultimate irony that a wizard would call a goblin a sadist."

Harry shrugged. "If the shoe fits, wear it."

The goblin turned to one side, and slowly walked, stopped, then walked the other way, pacing very slowly. "For centuries, wizards have been the sadists. Goblins have been tortured for amusement, or

because they were different. I derived no enjoyment from your pain per se, as a sadist would, though I was not saddened either. It was simply a matter of asserting control. But you, very surprisingly, seem to be... uncontrollable. Most humans speak at the first sign of pain. Why do you not?"

Harry was disinclined to share his deepest thoughts and motivations with this goblin. "I'm not going to answer—" He cut himself off as the familiar pain hit his foot again; he fell to the ground, holding it.

"I withdraw the question," said the goblin, and the pain stopped.

Harry hadn't expected that to happen. "Did you give me Veritaserum? Or something like it?"

"Something like it," agreed the goblin. "It is the version we use. We can stand more pain than you, or at least, most of you," he clarified, in a reluctant concession to Harry's endurance. "For us, the pain is a necessary motivator."

Harry wondered why they hadn't just given him the Veritaserum meant for humans, but he suddenly realized that the purpose hadn't been to acquire information, but that it had been control, domination.

"You will be incapable of lying," the goblin continued. "So, I would like to ask why you decided to create a bank."

Puzzled, Harry asked, "Are you asking me why I did that?"

"No," the goblin replied. "I am saying that I would like to ask it." He looked at Harry as if there was something Harry should have understood, but hadn't.

Ah, thought Harry, an indirect way of asking. Like Draco's 'will you leave if I ask you' thing. He decided he was willing to answer. "You were holding wizards hostage by closing Gringotts. I hoped that if there was a competitor, you would act like a usual business should act."

"We were holding the gold hostage, not the wizards."

“Same thing,” responded Harry. “We need money to live. If you hadn’t done that, I probably wouldn’t have started the bank.”

“I would like to ask how you acquired the gold for the bank.”

Harry shook his head. “If you ask, I won’t answer. Legally, is all I’ll say. Why does it matter?”

The goblin paused for a minute. It occurred to Harry to ask the goblin’s name, but decided it was irrelevant. I am not, he thought, going to start treating him or any of them like I would normal people, as if they have some right to hold me here.

“We make it our business to know where the money is in wizarding society,” the goblin explained. “We did not know about this money. So, we are... curious, and wonder if it was some kind of reserve fund whose purpose was to undermine us should there be a desire to do so.”

“Nope,” said Harry. “It’s old money, very old. The only reason you didn’t know about it was that the people who owned it didn’t want to put their money in Gringotts.”

“Ah, the Blacks,” said the goblin. Harry was annoyed with himself for giving enough information that the goblin was able to figure it out. “Yes, they kept far too little gold in their vaults to match their power and influence. We assumed their power was more political than monetary.

“I would like to ask why you committed crimes against goblin society.” The goblin never seemed to change his expression, which Harry found disconcerting.

“I don’t think it’s right to say that I ‘committed crimes against goblin society,’ Harry responded. “I did what I had to do, and a few of those things were illegal. I would have done them legally if there was any choice.”

“Of course, there was a choice,” responded the goblin, becoming irritated but trying to control it. “You could have not done those things.”

“If I hadn’t done those things, Voldemort would still be in power.”

“Yes. That was the other choice.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed in puzzlement. The goblin seemed to be intelligent and perceptive, though not very advanced ethically. How could he be so ignorant of what was at stake? “That wasn’t a real choice. Risk death to live free, or stay alive, but lose our freedom, be dominated. I’d rather die than be dominated.” Maintaining eye contact with the goblin, he added, “By him, or by you.”

The goblin didn’t respond to that. “But there was a choice. It was simply not one you found acceptable.”

Whatever, thought Harry in annoyance. “I suppose so, yes. But why didn’t you care? I mean, it seemed that you didn’t.”

“Let us say that I am your master,” said the goblin; Harry scoffed. “I know you resist the notion,” the goblin allowed, “but let us just say it for now. Let us then say that I am removed, and another of my kind takes my place. Do you care? If you are dominated, does it matter who is doing the dominating?”

“Are you saying that you don’t see any difference between—“

“Answer the question!” barked the goblin, as the sudden pain in Harry’s foot reminded him that he hadn’t.

“No!” shouted Harry as the pain intensified; he mentally prepared for the ordeal ahead. “And if I die this time, then I’ll have the last laugh!”

He realized how it sounded just as he said it, but was pleased by the look of confusion on the goblin’s face. He winced in pain and fell to the ground, holding his foot.

The goblin had resumed control over his tone and expression. “I withdraw the question.” The goblin regarded him silently for a moment, then said, “You are a very peculiar human.”

Unable to help himself, Harry laughed, wondering if Percy would think it was funny. “I’ve been told that. And now that you’ve withdrawn the question, I’ll answer it. Of course, I would fight being dominated to my last breath.” Again, he chuckled. “Literally, in this case, but usually it’s just a phrase. But assuming that I had no choice, then yes, it would matter. A benevolent master would definitely be preferable to a nasty one.”

“And you would fight, risk your life, your family’s life, to help the benevolent master over the ‘nasty’ one?”

“It would depend on the situation. But you really don’t see any difference between the Ministry and Voldemort? And since when is the Ministry your master?”

For the first time, the goblin laughed, but only for a few seconds. “Is your education no better than this? Are you unaware of how goblins have been treated throughout the history of this country?”

“I know there have been problems—“

“Problems!” repeated the goblin in astonishment. “Problems! Saying that there have been ‘problems’ is like saying that this wizard Voldemort was not a nice man!”

“I wasn’t finished with my sentence yet,” Harry pointed out. “Obviously what I said was very general. I’ve been told that humans have done a lot of terrible things to goblins. But I’ve also been told that goblins weren’t totally innocent either. And I wasn’t aware that the Ministry was your ‘master.’”

“If you cared whether you lived or died,” said the goblin, his expression suggesting that he still couldn’t quite believe that Harry could resist so well, “I would be your master. Even if I did not mention it with my every utterance, even if we appeared to be having a pleasant conversation, you and I would know that I was your master.

It would not need to be said. But you are young, and the young are often not aware of what is not said.”

“But the Ministry doesn’t tell you what to do,” said Harry. He tried to speak carefully, not out of fear of punishment, but because he didn’t know the situation very well. “I thought you ran Gringotts without interference from the Ministry.”

“Whether or not the Ministry exercises it, they have power over us. The one you called Voldemort exercised it. The ones immediately preceding him did not, but it did not matter. They had that power. They knew it, we knew it.”

“Yes, but the government always has power over us,” Harry protested. “It doesn’t mean that the government is our ‘master.’ Someone’s always in charge.”

“That government represents you, not us. Being ruled by your own kind is different from being ruled from outside. One is government; the other is subjugation. Or do you not understand that?”

Harry nodded slowly. “No, I understand that.” He could find no holes in the goblin’s logic, and was mildly chagrined that he had never thought of it that way.

The goblin looked satisfied, and stopped pacing for a moment. “Why was it so important to fight against this Voldemort? What did he do that was so objectionable?”

Harry wondered briefly whether the goblin really didn’t know, or whether it was to draw a desired response. “He was violent, he killed without remorse, he tortured for pleasure and entertainment.” Unable to resist, he added, “Not that it’s any better if it’s for a specific purpose.”

The goblin stared, unblinking; Harry continued his answer. “He controlled those who did the same. He recruited dementors, which cause misery for whoever they’re around.”

“Only humans,” interjected the goblin. “They have no power over us.”

"I didn't know that," admitted Harry. "Anyway... he treated Muggle-born wizards terribly; tried to make them a separate and lower class, took away their wands—"

"In other words, treated them as goblins are treated," retorted the goblin. "How sad, for humans to be treated so terribly. No wonder you fought."

The goblin's sarcasm aside, Harry was again chagrined to realize that there was some truth to the observation. "Look, I'm not saying there was nothing for you to be unhappy about. He killed one of your people too—"

"How do you know that?" the goblin asked sharply. He was clearly angry, seemingly having dropped his attempts to mask his feelings.

"Not answering," replied Harry, not caring to tell the goblin about his mental link to Voldemort and the backstory it entailed. Pain instantly hit his foot. "I'd recommend you withdraw the question."

The cramping moved up his leg and thigh as the goblin stared angrily. "Answer the question! How do you know?"

"Not... answering!" Harry shouted through the pain, grimacing, trying not to scream as his stomach knotted again. "We've been through this! Didn't you—" A mild scream escaped his lips. "—get it? I'll answer what I choose!"

"You have no right! You caused his death!"

Harry writhed in agony as the burning spread through his body. Between gasps, he shouted, "This... isn't control... it's sadism! Are you a sadist?" He screamed, and prepared to try not to breathe.

The goblin reached into his robe, and suddenly disappeared; an instant later, the pain disappeared as well. Harry took deep breaths, trying to recover. Interesting, he thought, how the effect goes away when he's no longer there to hear the answer.

Well, that really ticked him off. I wonder if the one who was killed was a friend of his, or maybe he's just really sensitive about any human killing any goblin. He may not be a sadist, but close enough. He may not enjoy my being in pain, but he doesn't give a damn. He just let me endure it that time because he was angry. But he doesn't want me to die. Why? What does he want? I'd love to know, but I'll be damned if I ask him. Asking him anything I really want to know gives him power over me

Over the next hour, Harry considered various aspects of his situation. He wondered whether he should refuse food and drink, but realized that it would be simple for them to force it on him. He would make no request, and he would not try to escape, because it was obvious that any attempt would be futile, and would result in his being bound again.

He thought over what the goblin had said. He couldn't deny that the goblins were being ruled—after all, there existed a Goblin Liaison Office in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, he recalled from his brief time at the Ministry—but it seemed as though their conditions hadn't been bad. He reminded himself that he didn't really know their conditions other than what little he'd been told; the reality could be as bad as what the goblin suggested, or it might be not bad at all, and the goblin was just unhappy with the idea that the Ministry could control them even if they didn't. Now, he thought wryly, I really regret not paying attention in History of Magic. Knowing that stuff would help me right now. Of course, he'd just say that anything I learned was wrong, if it contradicted what he knew or thought.

He thought about those he'd left behind. The Ministry must be going crazy, they've probably already started an attack on Gringotts. I'm not going to get my hopes up, though; Bill said it would take a month, and in the meantime they could move me to God knows what place. No, I'm here until they decide they don't want me anymore. Then... what? Do they let me go, trade me, or kill me? Or just let me rot here for the rest of my life, just for the heck of it? Funny how that one disturbs me the most; I'd just as soon they killed me as did that. Having to look at nothing but goblins for the rest of my life...

Such thought occupied him for the next hour, until the old goblin appeared suddenly in the same place, about ten meters in front of Harry. Harry looked at him, but said nothing, and gave no overt reaction.

"I would like to know why you refuse to discuss how you came to know that one of us was killed by the wizard you called Voldemort."

Well, at least he's back to the indirect phrasing, thought Harry. "Explaining that involves telling a personal detail about myself that only my close friends know, that I don't want the whole world knowing. I'll just say that I wasn't there when it happened, and no one told me about it. But I knew it happened."

"Did you feel that the goblin who died in any way deserved his death?"

"Of course not. He was just telling Voldemort what happened. Voldemort was super-angry because I had stolen something that was necessary to get, to make sure he could eventually die."

Once again, the goblin was impassive. "Do you feel in any way responsible for that goblin's death?"

Harry thought for a few seconds, but found he didn't have to think long. "No. I know that what I did caused him to have to report it to Voldemort, who killed him, but that doesn't mean I'm responsible. Voldemort is the one who killed him, not me."

The goblin eyed him coldly. "Under goblin law, the law which we apply to ourselves, anyone who is a part of the chain of responsibility can be held responsible for a crime if they have done something illegal."

Ah, thought Harry, this begins to explain why they bothered to kidnap me. "And you plan to hold me accountable under this law."

"Do you think you deserve not to be held accountable for your actions?"

“Well, our law usually recognizes the overall circumstances...” He trailed off as the pain started in his foot, reminding him that he hadn’t answered the question. Trying not to show that he was in pain, he labored to answer the question normally. “...when we judge someone for a crime. I think I don’t deserve to be held accountable in the way you would, because from my point of view, there were huge extenuating circumstances. But I know you don’t agree with that, so there’d be no point debating it.”

“Despite obviously breaking your own laws, you were not even held accountable to them, so it is not surprising that you should say this.”

Harry shrugged. “Like I said, extenuating circumstances. I think it’s a well-established idea, not just for me.”

“If I told you that you would be tried by us, in accordance with goblin law, what would your reaction be?”

He shrugged again. “I wouldn’t be surprised. You obviously didn’t kidnap me just to have a chat.”

“And this does not disturb you? You act as if you do not care.”

“My life has been one long string of things that happened to me that I couldn’t control, or things I was called upon to do because there was no choice. It wouldn’t exactly be right to say that I have no preference, but after a while you get resigned to the idea that things happen that you can’t control. I go through all kinds of hell and problems to try to save my society, manage to do it, then this happens because I had to do something that hurt your society while trying to save mine. It’s like, you can’t win. So, to hell with it. You’ll do what you’ll do.”

Harry realized he hadn’t intended to say all that, but it had more or less tumbled out of him; he hadn’t before had the conscious thought about all of the things that had happened in his life, but it was certainly true. His expression changing ever so slightly to one of surprise, the goblin spoke again. “Yet you fight me with a ferocity almost unprecedented for a human. Why fight so hard if you are so fatalistic?”

“Good question,” Harry responded, and thought for a few seconds. “Just stubbornness, I suppose. Lately I’ve been very resistant to the idea of people telling me what to do. Maybe because I didn’t have so many choices all my life. But also, the idea that while I can’t control whatever you do to me, I can control what I say or don’t say to you. So, I’ll control what I can, and not worry about what I can’t.”

The goblin paused again, then continued. “Humans were also killed by the one called Voldemort at the same time as the goblin was. Let us suppose that one of these humans was someone precious to you. Would you regret having done what you did, indirectly causing their death?”

Harry thought again. “No. I’d regret that they died, obviously, and I regret that anyone was killed by Voldemort after what I did, human or goblin. But Voldemort was so bad that any price was worth paying to get rid of him. If I was willing to die myself, then that’s pretty obvious.”

Now, the goblin’s eyebrows rose. “That was in the wizarding media, but I did not believe it, thinking it was fiction, to enhance your image. But clearly it is true, since here you cannot lie.” There was another pause. “If this Voldemort had been holding someone precious to you, and you knew in advance that your actions would cause their death, would you have done it?”

“Yes,” he said. “At least, I hope I would have enough strength to do it. There was just nothing else to do. Better to die than to live as a slave.”

The goblin said nothing for a very long time, perhaps five minutes. Harry was wondering why he was taking so long, but didn’t want to ask questions, or express any desires. He would answer questions he didn’t object to, as he’d agreed when he requested to be let out of the bonds, but he didn’t want to chat amiably. They had kidnapped and tortured him; he would not forget that.

“Why was it necessary for you to break into that particular vault and take that particular item?”

Harry thought about how to answer. “Please withdraw the question.”

After a second, the goblin agreed. "I withdraw the question."

Harry nodded. "I will answer, to some extent. I just don't want the pain trying to tell me how much to answer. Normally I wouldn't answer, but one of your people died, so I suppose you deserve to know. But first, I'd like your promise that what I say won't be repeated in the wizarding world."

"Why?"

"This is one of those things I don't feel like making public."

"And my promise will mean something to you?"

Harry shrugged. "I have no way of knowing whether it means anything or not. But with anyone—human, goblin, or house-elf—I'll assume that I can believe what they say until they show me otherwise. You may be a torturer, but I don't think you've lied about anything. So if you promise, I'll believe it."

"You think I am a torturer?"

The expression and tone didn't change, but Harry knew the accusation had gotten to him, because for the first time, the goblin had asked a question that he should have known not to. "Obviously, since I couldn't say it if I didn't think it was true. I'm surprised you don't think you are, since it's pretty clear to me."

"You would have experienced no pain if you had done as you were told. The pain was therefore your choice."

Harry shook his head. "You torture someone, for any reason, and you're a torturer. Doesn't matter if it's because they won't do what you say. Anyway, let's not debate it. Do I have your promise?"

The goblin appeared mildly annoyed at having to promise Harry anything, but nodded. "Yes, I promise."

Harry gave a simple explanation about the Horcruxes, omitting any mention of the others except that they existed. "So, that's why there was no choice," he concluded. "If I hadn't done that, Voldemort would still be alive today, torturing and killing. Both humans and goblins," he added pointedly.

After a short silence, the goblin disappeared without a word or sound. Wonder if he's going to go off and think about that, or if he just has other things to do. He's probably surprised that I was telling the truth about how necessary it was. But there's no way he's going to change his mind about how guilty I am. He's got too much invested in this, not only kidnapping me, but cutting their connection to the wizarding world. Gringotts is gone, there's no way they'll ever do business again. Wonder where they're going to live. Come to think of it, where do they live now? Not in wizarding villages, I'd think, and even if they did, there'd be mobs after them at this point. Do they live underground, like Gringotts is underground? Wish I had a book about goblins now...

A few hours after the goblin disappeared, a tray suddenly appeared not far from where he sat on the floor. There was a piece of bread, a small whole chicken, and a large glass of water. There was also a slightly large bowl, whose purpose Harry was unsure of. There was no silverware, so he assumed he was to eat the chicken with his hands. He took a drink of the water, and poured a little water into the bowl, intending to use it to wash his hands. To his surprise, the water vanished as it reached the bottom of the bowl. Ah, he thought, this is how I'm supposed to go to the bathroom. There must be a Vanishing field at the bottom. Convenient; wonder why they don't use this at Hogwarts. Guess they figure that kids would start Vanishing things they shouldn't.

He ate the chicken and bread until he was full, deciding to assume that more would be forthcoming and not to eat until he was stuffed just because the food was there. He sat back, his back resting against the wall; it occurred to him that he had absolutely nothing to do. Well, he thought wryly, I wanted some time alone. Looks like I got it.

* * * * *

The goblin didn't come back, and for the next... maybe a day—Harry wasn't sure; there was no clock, and underground, no way to tell whether it was day or night—no one came to his vault. He managed to sleep a little, but not too much. He longed for something to read, or keep him occupied, but remained determined that he would ask for nothing.

He thought about the goblins' situation vis-à-vis the Ministry. He didn't know to what extent the Ministry usually interfered with the goblins, but he knew that they were more or less under the Ministry's control. Why was that? Just because the Ministry had the power? Or was there some reason that a neutral observer would find reasonable?

He kept coming back to two facts. One, he didn't know the history, and so couldn't make a judgment based on what had happened before. Two, the goblins were intelligent, living beings who, it seemed, deserved to live free of any kind of domination if they chose to. Had they kidnapped him to make him understand this? No, he realized; the old goblin had sought to assert total control of his person and his actions, which wasn't necessary to make him understand their situation. There was something very personal about this for him, Harry was sure.

He was drifting in a mental haze when he looked up to find the old goblin standing there; he gave a start, then calmed down quickly. He almost made a flippant comment about how quietly the goblin had appeared, then remembered that he wasn't going to talk to the goblins as if they were friendly. He stared at the goblin expectantly.

"I have some questions for you. I will withdraw them if you ask me to, but be advised that the extent to which you answer them will influence your future treatment."

"You should already know this, but I don't care."

The goblin gave a slight nod. "I knew this, but it was appropriate to warn you anyway. Do you consider it legitimate and proper that the Ministry possesses dominion over goblins?"

Harry couldn't help reacting with surprise; had they been reading his thoughts somehow? He chalked it up to coincidence. "Basically, no. There could be things I don't know, but unless there's some really good reason, then, no."

"So, you think goblins should be free."

"Again, basically, yes."

"And if goblins were free, we would have our own sovereign state, and our own laws, which others would be bound to respect."

"I guess. I don't know that much about this sort of thing. Hogwarts doesn't really teach it, except in history, which was so boring it was hard to pay attention."

"I have read wizard-written history books," sniffed the goblin. "Rest assured that you have simply avoided being misinformed. Imagine, if you will, that in order to reach the artifact you desired—"

"Needed," interrupted Harry.

"You had found it necessary to travel to another country, let us say France," continued the goblin, unfazed by the interruption, "and broken into an old and esteemed institution there. Extradited after accomplishing your task, you stood trial for your actions. Would you question the legitimacy of the trial?"

Harry could see where this was going, but wasn't going to stop answering just because he didn't like the answers. "No, I wouldn't."

"You would accept the verdict of that court."

"I'd have no choice but to accept it," Harry pointed out. "Obviously, no one wants to accept a verdict that goes against them. I'd hope that they'd understand the reason that I did it, and incorporate that into their judgment."

"So, to review. You accept that goblins should be free, and should have a sovereign state. You view the court of a sovereign state as

legitimate. Does it not follow, then, that you should view our judgment as legitimate?”

Harry thought, and his right foot suddenly cramped. Rolling his eyes in annoyance, he said, “Will you please—”

“I withdraw the question.”

Harry almost said ‘thank you,’ but resisted, as they deserved no politeness for not inflicting pain. He resumed his contemplation, and finally answered. “I’d say it follows that way in theory, not in real life. One problem is that in real life, it didn’t occur to me that I was breaking any law other than the one enforced by the Ministry. If I failed, I’d be dead anyway. If I succeeded, and killed Voldemort, I knew I’d be forgiven. I had no feeling of knowingly committing a crime.

“The second problem is that you kidnapped me to get me here, which I believe is not what real countries do. They request the person be handed over, and if the country refuses... I don’t know, I guess it affects their relationship or something. Like I said, this isn’t my strong point. Diplomatic stuff happens, but not kidnapping. So, it’s hard to see your judgment as legitimate when your way of getting me here wasn’t legitimate.”

“Your first point is utterly erroneous,” retorted the goblin. “One’s consciousness of committing a crime is irrelevant; what matters is what one does. The second point is also irrelevant; it is not unheard of for countries to resort to extra-judicial extradition in important cases when it is felt that there was no other way to achieve justice, and the eventual verdict is not seen as tainted by this.” I’ll bet it’s seen that way by the country he was taken from, thought Harry. He knew he was ill-equipped to argue the point; there had to be a good argument against what the goblin said, but he also knew that it was irrelevant in any case. They would do what they would do.

“You will be tried, according to goblin law, the law we use to govern ourselves,” announced the goblin. Big surprise, thought Harry, though he kept his expression level. No point in needlessly antagonizing them. “The first step in the process is that the defendant must

recognize the supremacy of the court, and agree to submit to its will. When tried, will you do so?"

"No."

The goblin's expression was unchanged; he had obviously expected the answer. "The trial will begin when you agree to submit to the will of the court." Harry gave no reply, and after a few seconds, the goblin vanished.

Less than a minute later, he began to notice a peculiar smell in the air. A minute after that, he fell unconscious.

* * * * *

When he awoke, he discovered that he was bound again, but a little differently than before. His legs were tied up as before; there were ropes around his wrists which were connected to pegs in the wall, but with a certain amount of flexibility. He realized that it was enough to take care of bodily needs—the bowl was still there—but not enough to be remotely comfortable. He tugged gently at them, only to be rewarded with gentle shocks in both wrists. As a test, he tugged at one harder, and got a stronger shock. He looked around the room; everything else looked the same.

Well, this is going to be fun, he thought sardonically. Just me and my thoughts. I guess they're going to let me rot in here until I agree to their terms. There's obviously no escaping. Wonder if you can go crazy from having nothing to do. Even talking to Narcissa Malfoy wouldn't seem so bad right now.

The hours passed, painfully slowly. He tried playing mental games, imagining conversations with various people, and recalling how various spells worked. He even tried meditating, something he'd heard about once, but he didn't seem able to do it well. Too many thoughts. He realized he could call Kreacher, and Kreacher might be able to come—he knew from the story about Regulus that it was theoretically possible, though maybe not through Gringotts' defenses—but it was very risky, and of dubious value. Kreacher could very easily be caught, he knew, and might well be killed if he was.

More importantly, they knew that he had a house-elf, and what was possible, so they had to have defenses. He wasn't willing to risk it.

Many hours—of course, he had no idea how many—later, he started drifting off to sleep, fatigue overpowering the fact that he was in no comfortable position to sleep. It seemed that he had just drifted off when he felt something poking his leg from below. Startled, he came awake and looked around—had it been an insect?—but saw nothing. A few minutes later, he started to drift off again, and again, felt the poking. Again looking, he again saw nothing. It happened a third time, then a fourth. He finally realized what was going on: he would not be allowed to sleep until he agreed to what they wanted. He brought himself to full alertness, determined to try not to fall asleep for as long as possible. He succeeded for several hours before falling asleep again, and being suddenly awoken again. Growing more and more frustrated, he started to realize that the aching tiredness he felt would only grow worse.

He decided to try what had saved him from the torture: holding his breath until he passed out. For a half hour or so, it didn't work because either he involuntarily breathed, mainly due to tiredness, or he fell asleep before he could pass out, and was jolted awake by whatever in the floor was doing it. Finally he succeeded, but the next thing he knew, he was jolted awake again. Had he slept at all? There was no way to know, and he felt no less tired. He decided it wasn't going to work, if only because it was the combination of torture and passing out that had stressed his body so badly the first time. This time, it was only passing out, which probably wouldn't be enough.

Half a dozen aborted sleep attempts later, he felt himself being hit in the side by a thick wooden stick that hovered near him, just out of his reach. He gathered that he'd fallen asleep and being poked at by the floor hadn't woken him up, so a new method to keep him awake was being used. He soon fell asleep, and instantly felt the stick whacking him again. He barely repressed the urge to scream in frustration as his body screamed out for the sleep it needed and was being denied.

* * * * *

Ron walked through the fireplace at Grimmauld Place, just having finished his day at work, though he might go back again after dinner. He was now splitting his time doing the unofficial work for his father, and helping Bill at the bank. It had been difficult for Bill to find the free time to train Ron even to do simple tasks, but Ron was now distributing and looking at loan applications, often from the very people he talked to on his father's behalf. The bank was now extremely busy, as it was virtually certain that Gringotts would shut down permanently, or at least, be run by goblins no longer.

The lot of the Muggle-borns persecuted by Voldemort was slowly improving, largely due to Arthur's strenuous efforts, and some help from Kingsley where needed. A few had been hired to work at the Ministry itself, though the Ministry was facing a money crunch of its own, as some people couldn't or wouldn't pay their taxes, pleading poverty due to the bulk of their money being trapped in Gringotts. Ron kept his ear to the ground for possible jobs for the Muggle-borns, but very few were available. He was beginning to seriously entertain the idea of suggesting to his father that they use magic to help the Muggle-borns get jobs in the Muggle world, if only temporarily, until the economy got better. He doubted his father would approve the idea, however. Any magical intervention in the Muggle world contained risks.

At least no one's complaining about the dementors, thought Ron. The combination of Harry's kidnapping and his letter urging patience had the effect of making people ashamed to complain; their complaints now were in the direction of the goblins. Almost the whole wizarding world was furious, and Kingsley had had to restrain people from trying to burn down Gringotts, if only so the wizards and witches participating in the siege could do their work uninterrupted. The Prophet was running highly inflammatory articles about goblins and their past misdeeds. Ron's grasp of history was shaky at best, but even he knew that humans had done plenty to harm goblins in the past. But none of that was mentioned by the Prophet.

Dudley walked into the room, and he and Ron exchanged greetings. Having spent a few hours in his company for the past few days, Ron had gotten to know Dudley reasonably well, and had no problems with him. He seemed to have grown out of the character that Harry

had described previously, and wasn't unpleasant to be around. He was probably quieter than usual, Ron thought, because the wizarding world was still new to him, though he seemed to be learning more and more every day.

"So," ventured Dudley hesitantly, voice low, "Kreacher is... well... as good as dead, isn't he?"

"You can talk at a normal volume," said Ron. "House-elves have very good hearing; he can probably hear you from any room in the house no matter how quietly you talk. But yes, it was definite yesterday that he was past the point of no return."

"And he's happy about that."

Ron shrugged. "House-elves are different from us in some basic ways. But he really respects Harry, and in his culture, that means something. Also, I can understand the 'I'm old, I'm ready to go' thing. Not that I'm old, but... you know some of what Harry and Hermione and I have done. We've done stuff that we knew could get us killed, had a good chance of it. Not that I want to die, but you get a little used to doing dangerous stuff. Kreacher probably wouldn't have had much longer in his natural life anyway, so I can see where he's coming from. There are definitely worse ways to go."

Dudley paused for a minute. "I just can't see thinking that way."

"I guess once you risk your life, you see things differently. So, it was quiet here today?"

Dudley nodded. "I spent a while talking to Albus. It was pretty interesting. Funny how I'm getting used to talking to a portrait."

"What'd he talk about?"

"Various things, a lot about Harry. A little bit, the same as stuff you and Hermione have said, but more about him overall. With you two, it's what you did. With Albus, it's what kind of person he is. He said he thinks Harry will come out of this okay. I asked him why he thought so, and he said that Harry was the toughest kid his age Albus had

ever seen. It seemed strange for him to say that, because you look at him, and you don't think of him as 'tough.' But Albus said he meant it like, resilient, can deal with whatever life throws at him."

"Sounds about right," agreed Ron.

"But he also said that he hopes life stops throwing stuff at Harry, because even he must have a breaking point. And if he's fighting the goblins like Albus thinks he is, and that on top of the Voldemort thing..."

"Yeah, I've thought of that. Well, when we get him back, he should have plenty of time to get better, we'll make sure everyone leaves him alone."

"Still no word from the goblins?" asked Dudley.

"Nope. No demands, no acknowledgment that they have him, nothing. They haven't denied it, either, just no communication at all."

"Where do they live, anyway?"

"There are goblin villages, apparently. You didn't see this in the Prophet the other day?" Dudley shook his head. "One of the goblin villages isn't far from Hogsmeade, and after Harry was kidnapped, a bunch of people from Hogsmeade went there. They said they were going to ask questions, but everyone knows they were really going to crack some heads. But the goblins were gone, the place was deserted. It kind of made sense; they had to know they were in big danger after they took Harry. Nobody has any idea where they are now."

They talked for a while longer, Hermione joining them a little before six. Soon thereafter, most of the Weasleys assembled there for Kingsley's daily briefing. Kingsley came through the fireplace at a quarter after six.

"Well, there is news," said Kingsley; everyone reacted with surprise. "The goblins have released a statement." He took out a piece of paper and read. "The goblin community announces that we have

apprehended the criminal Harry Potter, and he will stand trial for the crimes of malicious trespassing, the use of the Imperius Curse, theft, vandalism, and contributory responsibility to murder. Since the wizarding community has chosen not to act, we feel we must, in the name of justice.' That's all."

"Well, at least we know now they have him," said Ron angrily. "I'm sure he'll get a completely fair trial."

"Yes," agreed Kingsley, "if there was any doubt about what the verdict would be, they wouldn't have kidnapped him. Anyway, this doesn't help us much, except in that we can stop investigating all avenues that don't involve goblins. Still no demands, or anything of the sort."

A few more questions were asked, but Kingsley had given all the news he could. Ron held back the impulse to ask why he thought Harry hadn't called Kreacher, as he knew that Kingsley had no better idea than he did. He'd better call within three days, thought Ron, or else Kreacher could die, all for naught.

* * * * *

Harry had no idea how long it had been since he had slept; he only knew that he desperately needed sleep. His thoughts were jumbled, confused. He couldn't keep a line of thought going for as much as a minute before either another random thought intruded, or sleep did, followed by a rude physical awakening.

On a few occasions, he nearly called out that he was ready to give up, to do whatever they wanted; he had to think hard to remember what it was. Say that I recognize their court, was that what it was? What's so bad about that? No, I can't do it. They're the enemy, I can't do what they want me to do. I can't give in to Voldemort. No, wait, Voldemort's dead. But I can't give in.

His determination to fight rarely flagged, however, even in the face of a lack of sleep that in his increasingly few lucid moments he felt threatened his grip on reality. He had already had what must have been auditory hallucinations. Petunia shouting at him for something

or other. Dumbledore speaking to him quietly. Sirius laughing. They're not really there, he told himself. You have to keep fighting.

Sleep teased him, fluttered in and darted away, always just out of his grasp. He had no idea what happened to the human body, the human mind, when sleep was denied for a long time, but he was now finding out. It was like being constantly thirsty and never being able to drink, but somehow worse. My mind is all I am, he thought, and it's being taken from me, piece by piece. He tried desperately to marshal his thoughts, to assert control over his mind. It was a huge effort; he felt he couldn't keep it up for long.

I wonder if they're trying to find me, he thought. Ron and Hermione are probably doing everything they can, but what can they do... Kingsley, Bill, I wonder how the bank is doing... Kreacher probably wouldn't mind killing a few goblins...

Kreacher! If I call, he can come! Why didn't I do this before?

Some part of Harry's mind recalled that he had thought of it before, but not done it for a reason. He had no idea what that reason was, and couldn't think of it now. He had to do what he could, it was getting more and more difficult to hold on...

"Kreacher!"

In almost an instant, Kreacher was standing in front of him, a joyous expression on his face. "Mas—"

In his haze, Harry almost couldn't follow what happened the second after Kreacher appeared. From two locations in the wall, more than a hundred thin, razor-sharp metal spears sprang out, hurtling towards Kreacher at lightning speed. Kreacher seemed to explode in a puff of pink and red. Flesh, bone, and blood flew all over, including onto Harry. The floor was a mess; no piece was larger than a Quidditch Snitch.

Harry gasped, letting out a guttural cry of grief and disbelief. The shock of what he had seen quickly brought him back to nearly-full alertness; adrenaline and fury washed through him. "You bastards!!"

he screamed at the walls. Desperation took him over as he realized that he should have known it might happen; he suddenly remembered why he hadn't done it before. He raged at the walls, more frustrated than ever by the physical confinement, the pain, and the torturous lack of sleep. "You foul, murdering, fucking bastards!!" Feeling tears coming on, he had never felt so helpless, even when Sirius had died. At least then he could chase down the one who did it, try for revenge. Now, he could do nothing but impotently rage at thin air, the remains of a being who had served him faithfully spread all around him.

Lost in his fury and misery, he barely noticed the white mist that enveloped him. He slowly lost the energy to scream, and saw an armor-clad Kingsley appear out of nowhere. He was followed by two others, which was all Harry could register before he slipped into the blessed relief of unconsciousness.

* * * * *

Harry was lying flat on his back, feeling no better than he had the last time he'd been awake. He was still desperately tired, but felt as though something in his body had pushed him awake, as if he'd drunk five cups of coffee. Still heavily disoriented, he looked around; the first thing he saw was Kingsley's face.

"Harry," the man said. "We're very glad you're okay."

"Kreacher..."

Kingsley shook his head. "I'm sorry, Harry."

"Have to sleep..."

"I know. But there's something we need you to do first. We have a Pensieve, we need you to put your memories in there, everything that happened since the goblins took you." He offered a wand, one Harry didn't recognize.

He ignored it, and rolled over as if to sleep. "Later. I need to sleep."

Kingsley suddenly appeared in front of him again. “Harry, I’m sorry, but this is very important, it can’t wait. I promise, soon you can sleep all you want. But we need your memories, we need to know what the goblins did to you.” He put the wand into Harry’s right hand. “Remember what happened, right after they took you, after you touched the card. Where were you?”

“Gringotts, in a vault...”

Kingsley moved the wand in Harry’s hand so it touched his head. “Everything that happened from then on, remember it, put it into the wand.”

Reluctantly, Harry focused on doing as Kingsley said. Intent on finishing and being allowed to sleep, he didn’t notice how much time was passing. Finally, Kingsley helped him put down the wand. “Okay, that’s enough. Harry, you seem to have memory damage. We don’t know how bad it’ll be. Do you remember my name?”

“Kingsley,” he breathed.

“Well, that’s good. We’ll find out the rest later. We’ll check these, and talk to the people at St. Mungo’s. Go ahead and sleep.”

Harry had never heard more welcome words. He was asleep within seconds.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 11, The Life That Should Have Been: Rescued from the goblins, Harry wakes up from a long sleep with memory damage—and a life that seems familiar, but yet unfamiliar.

Chapter 11

The Life That Should Have Been

Harry slowly came awake, with no small feeling of disorientation. It was as if, on the road back to wakefulness, he passed through more and different levels of consciousness than usual. He'd had strange dreams; not just strange as dreams often were, but in that they didn't even feel like dreams usually felt. There was an unusual texture to them that he couldn't have put into words if he'd tried.

Finally able to look around, he saw that he was in a room, not large or small, with no furniture except for the bed he was on, and a few chairs. He suddenly realized it was St. Mungo's; oddly, he knew more from the smell than what he saw. He'd been there before, and hospitals often had a distinctive smell.

The door opened, and a man and a woman walked in, both obviously Healers, by their deep green robes. "How are you doing?" asked the woman.

He thought for a few seconds. "Disoriented, like my mind isn't sure of what's going on."

She nodded. "I'm afraid that may be with you for a day or two, but it should go away. Along with the sleep deprivation, the goblins gave you drugs that alter one's sense of reality, and can cause memory damage."

"What happened? How did I get here?"

The man silently walked to the door, opened it, and spoke to someone. A few seconds later, Kingsley walked in. Harry repeated the question.

"It was because of Dobby," said Kingsley. "He drank a—"

"Dobby?" Harry repeated, confused. "I don't remember it being Dobby. It was another house-elf..." Harry struggled to remember. In his

mind's eye, he had a hazy vision of a very old elf, but the name wouldn't come... "Kreacher?"

"Kreacher? No, that's Sirius's elf," responded Kingsley. "Like I said, your memory may not be reliable for a few days. After that, it should be all right, we hope. Anyway, Dobby drank a substance that allowed us to track him, even through heavy shielding. It turned out that you weren't being held in Gringotts, even though you thought you were. It was made to look like Gringotts, but it was a room a kilometer outside one of the goblin villages."

"Why did they want me to think I was in Gringotts?"

"Probably to discourage any escape attempts," said Kingsley. "The substance he drank had magical properties that would have allowed us to get there even if it had been Gringotts—we think—but it was easier that it wasn't. I think they didn't keep you in Gringotts just in case something like this happened, and we found a way in. Once in, we could possibly have taken Gringotts from the inside. We're still conducting a siege of it, and we'll be arresting any goblins we find. It's basically a state of war right now. We think they have a base of operations somewhere other than Gringotts, but we have no idea where. There have been terror attacks on humans in the past few days; we think they're in league with the dementors and the remainder of the Death Eaters.

"We took the magical portal that was provided by what Dobby drank; of course we had shielding so that what happened to him didn't happen to us—"

"Why didn't he have shielding?" asked Harry, still very sad over Dobby's loss.

"He insisted we not give him any," said Kingsley. "It would have tipped the goblins off that we expected you to call him, and they might have suddenly moved you, or even decided to suddenly kill you. You know how he was, Harry. Hermione tried to talk him out of it, but he insisted that whatever was the best way to get you back, we did, even if it was very dangerous to him.

“So, we were able to get you out of there, but we weren’t able to capture any goblins, which we hoped to do. You’ve now been sleeping for a little over twelve hours, and you should get some more soon. But I wanted to check your memory first, since they tell me that there may be temporary damage. I’m going to tell you a few things, and you tell me if they sound right. Okay?”

Harry nodded. “Your name is Harry Potter. Your parents’ names are James and Lily Potter; you have no brothers or sisters. Your closest friends are Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, who are also a couple, and have been for a year. You’re famous; you’re known as the Boy Who Lived, because you survived a Killing Curse at the age of one. Is this sounding familiar?”

“It’s kind of hazy, but yes, it sounds right,” said Harry.

“Good. You live in Godric’s Hollow, and you’re a hero in the wizarding world because of your recent defeat of Voldemort, who almost killed you as a baby. Your godfather, Sirius Black, lives in Grimmauld Place, which was the center of the resistance to Voldemort. The leader of the Order of the Phoenix, Albus Dumbledore, died last year; the senior members became your parents, Sirius, and me. You’ve been something of a hero since defeating Voldemort, which you’re not very thrilled with. You left Hogwarts a year ago, before your seventh year, to become an Auror. Your colleagues are worried about you, by the way. I’ll be happy to tell them you’re all right.”

“I’m an Auror?” asked Harry, surprised.

Kingsley nodded. “And a good one, though you still have a lot to learn. Youngest one ever; we made an exception and let you in early. Mainly because of all you’d done at Hogwarts, being the leader of Dumbledore’s Army, and so forth. Do you remember that?”

“Yeah, I kind of do...” Even though he hadn’t been awake for very long, Harry felt himself growing tired again. “I don’t remember much about my parents, though.”

“Well, they’ll be sorry to hear that,” joked Kingsley. “Seriously, they’ll understand. They were worried sick when the goblins kidnapped you. They wanted to come see you now, but I told them it was better to wait until we knew what your situation was going to be. The Healers tell me you’re going to be okay, and I think you will, but you need to get acclimated to being back. Are you tired?”

“A little,” Harry admitted.

“I’m not surprised,” said Kingsley sympathetically. “From the memories, it seemed as though you hadn’t slept for five or six days. That’ll do bad things to you, so you do need to rest up more. I’ll come back later to check on you.”

“Okay.” Kingsley left the room with the Healer, and Harry was alone again.

Thank God I’m out of there, he thought, I thought I’d never sleep again. That was horrible. Damn them for screwing up my memory, can’t even remember my own parents. Strange how I feel like they died a long time ago, something about being the Boy Who Lived has that association. I guess it’s just weird stuff bouncing around my head, whatever drugs those goblin bastards gave me. Poor Dobby, he didn’t deserve to die like that...

He rolled over, got comfortable, and was soon asleep again.

* * * * *

“He’s awake, I saw his eyes move!”

“Sssh, honey, let him take his time. You know what he’s been through.”

Harry opened his eyes completely, and saw his parents beaming at him, clearly extremely pleased to see him. He felt a very odd sensation: it was as if it was the first time he’d ever seen them, and yet they were very familiar. “Hi,” he said weakly.

His mother took his hand in hers, kissed it, and clasped it with both of her hands. "How do you feel, Harry?"

"Better than before," he said. "A lot better. Do you think the St. Mungo's people will get mad at me if I get up?"

His father shrugged. "You never let that kind of thing stop you before."

"I guess that's true," agreed Harry. "Physically, I'm mostly okay. Mentally, I'm still kind of foggy. I can't remember much about you, or my childhood. When I was out, I had this dream that I grew up with your sister and her husband," he added, looking at his mother.

James roared with laughter; his wife gave him an admonishing glance. "James, we've been through this. I don't want you making fun of Petunia. I know how she is, but still... she can't help it, she has her own problems."

"I'll say; one of them is her husband. But that's her fault too." Sitting further down the bed than his wife, James patted his son's leg. "I'm sorry the stuff they gave you made you have nightmares," he said with an impish grin.

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, it wasn't good. Have I even met them? I must have, I had a clear image of their faces... usually angry at me."

"Yeah, they don't like wizards," agreed his father. "Yes, you've met them a few times, on your mother's admirable but futile attempts to make a connection between our family and theirs. I think she's more or less given up, so hopefully, the nightmares will stop."

"James Potter, don't you dare blame me for the dreams Harry has, especially under the influence of those awful goblins." Harry reached out for his father's hand; understanding what his son wanted, James gently pulled Harry's hand, providing leverage so his son could sit up. He swung his legs over to touch the floor, sitting on the edge of the bed. James started to stand, but Harry gestured for him not to. "I want to see if I can get up on my own."

“Just like always,” said James.

Slowly, Harry got to his feet, and found he could stand without too much difficulty. Lily stood quickly and wrapped Harry in a hug.

Again, he had the sensation of this being both strange and familiar. He hugged her tightly, feeling far more of an emotional impact than he would have thought. He felt it should be natural to hug one's mother, but now it felt different somehow. “I missed you,” he said.

“We missed you too, sweetie,” she said, squeezing him harder. She let him go, and his father patted him on the shoulder. “Ready to go home?” asked James. Harry nodded. “Right, we're already done the paperwork, so we'll just get you to the nearest fireplace.”

Harry took a few steps, then looked at his right hand, and stopped. He held up his right hand and looked at it; there was a simple gold ring on his right ring finger. “I don't remember wearing a ring.”

“You don't remember a great many things,” his mother gently pointed out.

“You've had that ring,” said James, “since you were eleven. Clench your right fist tightly; that should help you remember.”

Harry did, and suddenly he saw, as if it was a little above wherever he happened to be looking, the living room of a home. He saw Ron and Hermione sitting on a sofa, and Cho sitting near them, on a smaller sofa. They were apparently chatting happily, but he could only see them, not hear them. He looked at his father quizzically.

“When you were eleven, you were very happy to go to Hogwarts, but you said you would really miss us,” explained James. “You said you wished there was some magical way you could be there and be at home at the same time. Of course, there isn't, but we gave you this ring, which is the next best thing. By making a tight fist, you can always see the living room of our home. You've said that when you were homesick, you often used it, and it made you feel better.”

Harry nodded. He still didn't remember, but it sounded good. "I'm sure it did."

They walked out of the room, down the hall to the elevator, and were finally in the lobby. Harry had to sign one form, and they could go. In front of the fireplace, he hesitated. "What's the name of our house?"

His parents exchanged a glance; Lily gave him a sympathetic look. "It's all right, dear. You'll feel better soon, things will start coming back to you." She threw Floo Powder into the fireplace, said "Potter's Hollow," and walked through. His father gestured him to go ahead, and he did.

He was suddenly in his home's living room, which as he had already seen through the ring, looked like most living rooms he had ever seen. Nice furniture, but very lived-in, with a few books and magazines spread on end tables and a coffee table. He looked up to see three faces: Ron, Hermione, and Cho.

Hermione was first, walking up to him and giving him a hug. "They said your memory would be strange. You remember me, right?"

He put his hands on her shoulders and smiled. "If you always knew the answer to every single question in school, then yes."

Ron and Cho laughed. "Well, there might have been a few that I didn't know," said Hermione, with a small grin.

Ron stepped forward and gave Harry a quick hug. "But she never would have admitted it," he agreed. "We're so pleased they got you out of there, mate."

"I'm pretty pleased too," agreed Cho, who stepped up to Harry and with a mischievous grin, took his head in her hands and planted a strong kiss on his lips. Slightly surprised at first, Harry soon responded in kind.

A few seconds later, she slowly broke off the kiss, and smiled at him. He grinned back. "So, you're my girlfriend, right?" he asked, with feigned uncertainty that wasn't entirely feigned.

Ron, Hermione, and his parents broke up laughing. "If she's not, I'd say she has some explaining to do," joked James. "Well, son, she was the prettiest girl at Hogwarts, so yes, she must be your girlfriend. We Potters could—"

"Always pick them," Lily finished in unison with him. "How many dozen times have you said that now?"

James shrugged. "I can't help it if it's true."

"If you want to go upstairs," said Cho with a gleam in her eye, "I could remind you in more detail."

Harry laughed. "That sounds good," he agreed. "I'm really happy to see you all."

"Well, come on, let's sit down," suggested James. Lily, Ron, and Hermione sat on the sofa, James in a comfortable chair, and Harry and Cho in a loveseat near the sofa. She snuggled close to him; he put his arm around her shoulders. He looked at her, and was heartened to see her happiness that he was back.

"So, you really don't remember a lot of stuff?" asked Ron.

"Before I was kidnapped, no, not much."

"But why would they mess with your memory? Or, why did they kidnap you in the first place?"

"They wanted to put me on trial," Harry said, recalling that detail out of the fog that was his memory. "Because of something I did... something we did?"

"Breaking into Gringotts," supplied Ron.

"Oh, yes, to get the Horcrux," recalled Harry. "They were really angry about that, especially because it got one of their people killed. They thought that was an offense against them, as if they were a different country or something. They wanted me to recognize their legitimate

right to put me on trial, which of course I wouldn't do. So they wouldn't let me sleep for days and days, figuring that in the end I'd break down and agree."

"You never would, of course," Ron said confidently.

"I'm not so sure," said Harry. "It's terrible, almost worse than pain, in some ways. It's kind of like being starved. Your body just wants one thing, it needs it, but it can't get it, and it's hard to focus on anything else. I think I would have either broken, died, or gone nuts. I'm not sure which would have happened. Then after they killed... funny how I still think it was Kreacher, strange how memory is... after they killed Dobby—I mean, it was almost like he exploded, it was disgusting, and so shocking—I just lost it, I was raving at them, so I probably wouldn't have broken soon after that. But before, I might have. It's such a horrible feeling."

"Well, you're out of there now, and with the people who care about you," said Lily reassuringly. Harry looked down at Cho, who smiled up at him. He leaned down to give her a quick kiss.

James gave Ron an amused glance. "You're not going to say anything about that?"

Ron shrugged. "Usually I would, but I'll give him a break today," he replied magnanimously. "I sometimes give you a hard time when you two start doing that around other people too much."

"Ron means 'around him' and 'at all,'" clarified Hermione.

"And, 'always,'" added James.

"All right, all right," said Ron. "I get it. So, you didn't find out anything from them?"

"Not really. Just that they seemed to want to be recognized as their own country, they seemed really sensitive about the idea that they're under the domination of wizards."

“Huh,” muttered James. “Domination, my ass. They could’ve chosen to live by themselves. They did, mostly, except for Gringotts, and they did most of the dominating when it came to that. The Ministry didn’t allow competing banks, and believe me, the goblins took full advantage of that.”

“Why didn’t they allow competing banks, anyway?” asked Harry.

James shrugged. “Do I look like I got a History of Magic N.E.W.T.?”

“Do you look like you ever opened a history textbook at all?” asked Lily, with a wry look at her husband.

“Well, come on, it was Binns,” protested James. “As the kids have told us, death didn’t make him any more interesting.”

“It’s not the teacher’s job—“

“To make it entertaining,” James finished. “Yes, I’ve heard that. But it sure helps.”

Any further discussion on the topic was cut off when the fireplace lit up and a tall, handsome, dark-haired man walked out. “Sirius!” said Harry happily, disengaging from Cho to stand up to greet him.

“He remembers me! A very good sign indeed,” said Sirius, giving Harry a friendly hug, then taking a seat near James. “Great to have you back, Harry. A lot of people at the bank were asking about you.”

“The bank?” repeated Harry.

“You don’t remember the bank?” asked Hermione, surprised.

“Well, as long as he remembers his godfather, I don’t care if he remembers the bank!” joked Sirius loudly, with his trademark barking laugh. “A few weeks ago, after the goblins started to keep people from their money, I happened to ask my worthless house-elf a few lucky questions, and he reluctantly told me about a small fortune my parents had hidden in a wall, never told me about.”

“Three million Galleons,” put in Harry.

“Ah, so it is coming back to you,” said Sirius. “Good. So, I decided to get the help of Ron’s recently unemployed oldest brother, and open up my own bank. Business was brisk at the beginning, and now that Gringotts is shut down, it’s even harder for us to keep up with demand. I’m just taking a break to see you, but I’ll be heading back there. So, you do remember the bank?”

“Yeah, except... some things I just remember differently. You’ll think this is strange, but for some reason I thought it was my bank.”

Sirius laughed loudly. “Well, good! You can go down there and work, and I’ll stay here and relax!”

There was laughter all around. “No, thanks,” said Harry, smiling. “I think, bad memory or not, banking’s the last thing I’d want to do.”

“You’re telling me,” agreed Sirius. “Don’t care for it much myself. I’m really just helping Bill, right now, more or less as a public service.”

“With Sirius, it’s all about helping others,” teased James.

“You better believe it, old friend. Besides, I don’t see you doing anything useful with your three million Galleons.”

“Do I have three million Galleons?” asked James facetiously. “Hmmm, let me check my coinpurse...”

“Check your wall,” countered Sirius. “Here, I’ll help.” He took out his wand and pointed it at the wall. “Toujours Impur!”

Harry burst out laughing, as did everyone else. Sirius shrugged. “Well, don’t look at me, I did my best. You should have bought one of those homes with the huge, ancient supply of cash in the walls. Lack of foresight, James.”

“Yes, well, I have two things that are even better than money,” replied James, with affectionate glances at Lily and Harry.

“Ah, but you see, you’ve generously chosen to share that with me,” said Sirius, with a superior expression. “But you’re not getting any of the money.”

“I wouldn’t want it,” sniffed James. “Merlin only knows how it was obtained.”

“Knowing my family, it would probably shock even Merlin,” agreed Sirius. “The gold didn’t want to be lent to Muggle-borns. When we took it out, it was pleading, ‘please, please, use us to bribe government officials, purchase Dark artifacts, subvert all that’s good in the world!’ But I just laughed, and I said, no, you’ll be used to... feed hungry Muggle-born children! And it screamed, oh, the piteous screams, of bad gold being used for a good purpose...”

Laughing again, Harry took a second to notice how content he felt. In his family’s home, with good friends, pretty and adoring girlfriend by his side. Life is pretty good, he thought. Funny how it seems strange for it to be this way.

“I always said you should be a fiction writer,” said a grinning James.

“Nah, too much work. Besides, they have lots of fiction writers down at the Prophet.”

“Well, it should be getting better now that Voldemort’s gone,” countered James. “I was thinking of doing a few pieces for them.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” said Harry. “Sorry I don’t remember this—”

“You don’t have to say that every time you can’t remember something,” his mother said gently. “You don’t have to apologize.”

He nodded, appreciating his mother’s concern. “Anyway, Dad, I wanted to ask what you do for a living.”

To Harry’s surprise, Sirius and Lily chuckled. Feigning great interest, Sirius turned to James and said, “Yes, I’ve been wondering about that myself.” Looking at Harry, he added, “I believe the phrase is, ‘man of leisure.’”

“You should talk, Mr. My-House-Is-Made-Of-Gold,” retorted James. “You don’t exactly get up and go to the Ministry every morning.”

“And thank Merlin for that,” rejoined Sirius. “Can you imagine me at a desk every day?”

Smiling at their repartee, Lily answered Harry’s question. “Your father’s usual answer to the question is, ‘a little of this, a little of that.’ Some people say that when they don’t want to answer the question, but in James’s case, it’s really true. We’re not rich, but we have enough money to live on, so we don’t need regular jobs. One year, he replaced Madam Hooch at Hogwarts when she was away on sabbatical; that was before you started there. He’s done some freelance writing for the Monthly Snitch, the Quidditch magazine, and the odd piece for the Prophet. Let’s see... some curse-breaking, security consulting for permanent spells for newly constructed buildings...”

“You did some dragon stuff with Charlie,” said Ron.

“That’s right,” said James. “Fortunately, all the burn scars healed.”

“I wish I could have been with you at Hogwarts,” said Harry wistfully.

Lily grinned. “You said that so many times when it was happening. I remember your asking why Madam Hooch couldn’t have taken a sabbatical a few years later. You weren’t happy with her.”

“I had a good time, though,” said James. “Worked with Charlie; I hoped he’d go professional. He was good. Not as good as my son, of course—”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “If I had a Galleon for every time—”

“Yes, all right. But did you ever think he may have forgotten that?”

“No, I remember Quidditch,” said Harry. “I was a Seeker. I seem to remember that I was pretty good.”

“You were the best,” said his father proudly. “Anyway, at Hogwarts, I also made it my business to annoy Snape as much as possible. Nothing crude, just pinpricks in his self-satisfied self-regard. Arrogant prat, always thought he knew everything, and was better than everyone else.”

“Is that why he always gave Harry such a hard time?” asked Ron.

Without thinking, Harry answered, “No, it was because he fancied Mum.”

There was two seconds of total silence, then Sirius burst out in hysterical laughter, barking like a hyena. James and Lily both looked surprised, but for different reasons, Harry felt.

“Harry, I think this is one of those things you’re remembering wrong,” said Lily.

“You think?” said Sirius sarcastically, laughter slowly ebbing. “Oh, Merlin, what a funny thought... no, sadly for him, Snivellus wouldn’t have lowered himself to be interested in such a fine woman as our Lily. Not pure enough, you know. But then, he never did find himself anyone, so who knows? Maybe it wasn’t the ladies he was interested in.”

James chuckled. “If I had a Galleon—“

“You’ve said it before—“

“I know, but you’re way ahead. No, I just don’t think any woman would have wanted him. With that personality? A toad would be better.”

Harry noticed that his mother looked a little uncomfortable... or did she? He wasn’t sure, and he decided to try to change the subject. “What’s the situation in the wizarding world right now? I guess it’s much better, now that Voldemort is dead, right?”

His father nodded. “Much better, but far from settled, as your kidnapping showed. We still don’t know why the goblins did it; it’s as

though they had a death wish or something. If they were going to go over to Voldemort's side, they should have done it when he was alive. Now, they're just begging for an ass-kicking, and after what they did to you, I'd be happy to oblige. As would 90% of the wizarding world. I know, you said they don't want to be dominated, and you did break into their precious bank. But boy, talk about overreacting. Kingsley's going to have a hard time preventing a massacre if we find out where they're hiding, assuming it's not Gringotts. So, I think it will calm down at some point, but you Aurors will have your hands full for a while."

It was still strange for Harry to find himself referred to as an Auror. "And the dementors are still running around?"

"Well, really more like gliding, but yes."

"Not that that stops you from flying," said an obviously unhappy Lily.

Puzzled, Harry looked at her. "Do you mean me, or..."

"Both of you." She glanced at her husband. "You both had to make a point of going for a fly, even with dementors around." Harry got the impression that there had been at least one argument on the topic.

"You're damned right," said James. "We're not going to let them tell us what to do. And Harry was even keener to do it than me."

"I remember," sighed Lily.

"In fact, he wanted to call the Prophet, have them send over a reporter to take pictures, to make a public point about not being intimidated."

Harry's eyes narrowed slightly. "That doesn't sound like something I'd do."

James laughed. "No, it's not. I was making that up, test your memory. No, I suggested it, but your dislike of reporters is as strong as ever. Speaking of which, just so you know, there's a half-dozen more interview requests we've gotten since it was announced that you're okay. I don't suppose you'll be doing any of them."

“That depends,” said Harry. “How much are they offering?”

James looked puzzled. “That doesn’t sound like you.”

Harry grinned. “I was kidding.”

Everyone laughed, Sirius loudest of all. “He got you! Doesn’t happen often, but I love it when it does.”

“That wasn’t fair,” complained James. “His memory’s messed up. He caught me off guard.”

“Well, you taught him, old friend,” retorted Sirius. “As I’ve said many times before, he is his father’s son.”

The comment gave Harry a warm, happy feeling that he felt oddly unaccustomed to. Right then, he couldn’t think of a better thing to be said about him.

* * * * *

The rest of the day went equally well. There was a nice family dinner attended by the same people; the others told Harry stories about when he was younger that he had forgotten, like the time when he and Ron had broken into the Quidditch supply shed and put magical itching powder on Draco Malfoy’s broom, so he couldn’t stop scratching himself while he was supposed to be looking for the Snitch, and so lost to Hufflepuff, then thought to be the weakest Quidditch team. Ron explained that they hadn’t done it before a Gryffindor match partly so they wouldn’t be suspected, and partly so they could watch the results more easily. The story didn’t sound familiar to Harry, but after he heard it told, he felt he could remember it.

A few hours after dinner, James went out to help Sirius with some bank business. Harry sat at the desk in his bedroom, the desk at which he’d apparently done some summer schoolwork. He looked through the drawers and found a few old essays, but nothing exceptional, nothing to stir up important memories.

His mother suddenly appeared at the door to his room. "How are you doing, Harry?"

"Oh, Mum," he said, slightly startled. "Fine. Just... everything seems a little unfamiliar, but they say that'll go away. Why did you ask?"

She sat on the edge of the bed, facing him. "Harry, you were tortured, deprived of sleep," she said, her tone showing her feelings. "I know how strong you are, and that you might not want to talk about it, but that kind of thing has to have an effect on you, your father's bravado notwithstanding. I just wanted to know how you were feeling."

He shrugged lightly, not sure of what to say. "Right now, the fact that I can't remember much bothers me more than anything else they did to me. As for the other stuff... well, it was really hard, of course. One thing I remember... or at least, I think I remember, it's hard to trust any memory right now... is that part of how I got through it was by deciding that I didn't care if I died or not. One reason I don't trust that memory now, though, is that I definitely don't feel that way now. I feel like I have a lot to live for. Great family, friends, girlfriend... I feel like I'd really hate to die right now. But I'm pretty sure that was how I felt then. I can't imagine why."

She nodded; both her pain and her pride were in her eyes. "I think I can guess. If you're captured, you have no control over anything, including whether you live or die. The only real defense against that is to decide that you don't care, so they can't use it to coerce you. I thank God you're alive, of course, but I can understand why you would have felt that way."

"I just don't want you to think I didn't care if I saw you again," said Harry somberly.

Tears coming to her eyes, his mother stood. "Oh, Harry..." She reached out for his hand; he took hers, stood, and hugged her. "You're such a good boy," she said, her voice heavy with emotion. "We've always been so proud of you."

He said nothing as he felt his own tears threaten; he just held her, lost in the comfort and security of being held by his mother. After a

minute, she kissed him on the cheek, and they both sat on the bed, facing each other. She held onto his left hand.

“Anyway, it was bad, but I guess it could have been worse. What really bothers me is losing Dobby. So, he was our house-elf?”

“Not exactly, but kind of. After you freed him from Lucius Malfoy, he helped out here a lot, but your father and I refused to own him. We asked him to work at Hogwarts, mainly so he could look after you, but since you left Hogwarts, he spent more of his time here. We liked him, of course, and we miss him. But he died doing exactly what he wanted to do. Without him, we might not have you back. It’s very noble, and not that different from what you did against Voldemort.”

Thinking about that reminded him of another very hazy memory, one he felt he should ask about. “Mum... how did I survive the Killing Curse, at age one?”

“No one knows,” she said. “It’s one of the biggest mysteries of the century. It’s part of the reason you’re so famous.”

Harry didn’t want to tell her the other, vague memory he had, the one that couldn’t be right. “I guess Dad had some ideas about that.”

She laughed. “Oh, he did, all right. Quite a few of them. His favorite seemed to be that you were just too stubborn to die. He said it when you were small, but it really did turn out to be true. You always have been quite stubborn. Like with this business about flying, even though the dementors are there.”

“I’m sorry,” he said sincerely. “I guess you would worry. But we can’t just run away and hide, let them intimidate us.”

“I know. It’s almost driven me crazy all your life, when you were constantly taking chances at Hogwarts. But this is just who you are; you get it from your father. I have to accept it, but that doesn’t mean I like it.”

After a short pause, she changed the subject. "Harry... when you said that earlier, about... Professor Snape... where did that come from? I mean, you said it casually, you seemed very sure of it."

"I... I don't remember a lot of it. I remember a broken tree branch hitting Petunia." His confidence in his memory increased slightly as he saw her look of recognition. "He gave me some memories as he was dying. A lot involved you, but you wouldn't have him because of his interest in the Dark Arts, and his friends. I got the impression that he was on our side partly because it was what you would want from him. I think he never stopped loving you."

He saw the sadness in her eyes; her grip on his hand tightened a little. "I always thought there was more to him than what I could see. Unfortunately, he didn't show it anywhere near enough. But even if he had... we were just too different. It's one of those things where you can't help hurting the other person, even if you'd rather not."

"I'm sorry I said what I did earlier," he added. "I guess Dad doesn't know."

She almost smiled, and shook her head. "No, he doesn't. Can you imagine if he did? I'd never hear the end of it. They always hated each other so much. You remember—well, maybe you don't, but after you told us that Dumbledore had wanted Severus to kill him, and Severus hadn't wanted to but did it anyway, your father had a very hard time believing that, even though you were sure. He and Sirius were incapable of believing anything the least bit positive about Severus. I gave up trying to change your father's mind quite a while back." She paused for a minute. "We have a good marriage; there are very few things we just don't talk about. Severus was always one of them."

Harry found that he had conflicting feelings about Snape, especially since he couldn't totally trust his memories, even though his mother had confirmed some of them. He decided to change the subject, and ask more about his current situation. "Mum, I'm wondering... what do you think of Cho?"

Lily chuckled wryly. "What's a mother to say when her son asks her what she thinks of his girlfriend. No matter who her son is, the mother is almost bound to say something along the lines of 'she's not good enough for you.' Considering that my son is the youngest-ever Auror and the hero of the wizarding world... you get the idea. She's certainly pretty, as your father is fond of noting. And she's quite taken with you, but who wouldn't be. She's very nice; I have nothing bad to say about her. I'm not sure I know her well enough to say much more. The important thing, Harry, is how you feel about her. If you love her, then what I or your father think isn't that important. Of course, if I disapproved of her, then I probably wouldn't be saying this." She smiled a little at her own expense.

He grinned. "I understand. Really, I was just curious. But it's nice of you to say that."

"To be honest," she said, "and don't worry about your memory loss, because I've never told you this before, but when you were younger, I kind of hoped that you would end up with Hermione." To Harry's raised eyebrows, she added, "I know you didn't look at her that way, but I've always liked her quite a lot."

Harry felt oddly apologetic, as if he'd let his mother down by not having been attracted to Hermione. "She's a terrific friend. I guess I can see why you thought that. But I'm really happy for her and Ron, I think they're a good couple."

"Have you told them you think that?"

"Well, I can't really trust my memory right now. But no, I don't think so."

"I understand. Especially at your age, we don't always think to say things like that. But I think it would be very nice if you told them. I'm sure it would mean a lot to them."

"Maybe I will," he said.

She nodded. "I should go back out there; there are things I need to finish in the kitchen, and I'd like to finish before your father gets back."

But I wanted to see how you were doing.” She stood, and looked down at him for another moment. “I love you, Harry.”

His chest tightened; it was as if he had never heard the words before, even though he was sure he had. He stood to hug her. “I love you too, Mum.”

She kissed him again, and left the room. He sat back down, thinking about how lucky he was to have the life he had.

* * * * *

Harry woke up the next morning, noticing that the digital clock read 8:22 in large, red numerals. It occurred to him to wonder why he had a Muggle clock, but suddenly he remembered that he shared his mother’s interest in Muggle artifacts and had occasionally gone shopping in the summer with her in Muggle London. It had given him something in common with Ron, whose father was also interested in such things. He remembered his mother and Ron’s father having animated conversations when the two families got together.

Thinking about those times, he suddenly realized that his memory was gradually coming back; he hadn’t been able to remember that the day before. Thank goodness, he thought, I was getting worried that I’d never be able to remember anything. He walked over to his chest of drawers. Let’s see... socks are in the third one down. He opened it, and saw several pairs of clean socks. Yes! It’s coming back.

He got dressed and headed down the stairs, remembering on the way down that his mother often greeted him with a kiss on the cheek in the morning, because she was happy to see him during the two months a year he wasn’t at Hogwarts. He walked into the kitchen to see his father at the table reading the Prophet, and his mother preparing breakfast. As he walked past her, she intercepted him to kiss his cheek. He smiled and sat down.

He was surprised to see a second copy of the Prophet at his usual seat opposite his father. “We don’t get two of these, do we?”

James chuckled. "No, but it's good that you knew that. If there's an article about you, or you're prominently mentioned, they send you an extra copy. I always joke that it's like having a second subscription, since you live here. Speaking of which, we kept them away yesterday because it was your first day back, but you have to decide whether you're going to talk to the Prophet about what happened."

Harry looked at the front page, on which there were two equally prominent headlines: "Harry Potter Returns Home Safely" and "Aurors Beat Back D/D Attack in Hogsmeade." He glanced up at his father. "What does D/D mean?"

"It's shorthand the Prophet has been using lately, from around the time you were taken. It means dementor and Death Eater; since they're working together now. The Death Eaters conduct an attack, doing it in such a way that they allow dementors to get close to people."

Harry nodded, started to read the article about him, then noticed something he found surprising. "Rita Skeeter wrote this?"

"Of course," his father responded. "Why?"

Harry shrugged. "I just... had this idea that I didn't like her."

Lily laughed. "You don't, and neither do I. Your father persuaded you to make peace with her after everyone found out that Voldemort was really back. He's always been the one who thinks about your public image, which neither you nor I really care about. Unfortunately, your father is right, in that thinking about it yields better results than not thinking about it."

"Well, thank you, dear, for giving me that much credit," said James with what Harry assumed was feigned surprise. To Harry, he said, "It really is better to have her as your friend. If she likes you, or if it's in her interest, she'll write about you in a very flattering way, which helps your public image, and therefore, your influence, your ability to get things done that you want to do."

Harry nodded. "I vaguely remember this conversation; my memory's getting better. I had to get Hermione to promise that she wouldn't out Skeeter as an Animagus, right?"

"Yes, that's right. And it's been better in the long run. Skeeter had to go to ground when Voldemort took over, of course, but her positive articles in your sixth year made a big difference in how you were perceived after they accused you of Dumbledore's murder. There are definite benefits. And she's not a bad person."

"Just utterly without conscience," muttered Lily.

"A minor flaw," deadpanned James. "Actually, I'm not sure whether she has a conscience or not. I would say that she's a real 'user,' in that she looks at you in terms of whether you can be of use to her or not. And if you can, she makes sure she's of use to you. It's very symbiotic."

"You mean, 'repugnant,'" retorted Lily as she served James and Harry their food. "I know it ends up better, but I'd rather be pure, and restrict myself to dealing with people I like, or at least, don't dislike. I hate the breathless way she writes everything, as if a scandal is always right around the corner."

"Not about Harry," pointed out James. "Not since those Triwizard articles, anyway. Now, it's, 'can you believe how wonderful this young man is?'"

"Well, I'm not going to give her extra points for writing the truth," retorted Lily as she sat down with her own food, with a small grin at Harry. "But you know what I mean. If you hadn't made that deal with her, it would be, 'he can't really be this good, so what are the skeletons in his closet?'"

"And you've made my point for me," countered James. "If I hadn't made the deal with her, then yes, she'd be doing that. Therefore, my doing the deal with her was the right thing to do."

Lily sighed. "I know. It just comes down to how it makes you feel. I know the alternative isn't good. It just leaves a bad taste in my mouth."

"Well, have one of the scones," suggested James, as he took a bite of one. "It leaves a very good taste in my mouth."

"Yeah, they're really good, Mum," added Harry.

"Thank you, Harry. That's very sweet."

"I don't get one of those?" asked James with mock indignation. "I said it first, you know."

"You were just trying to change the subject."

"I'd say the subject was ready to be changed, and I did it with a compliment. I'm hurt that you don't appreciate it."

She chuckled. "I'll bet." Harry saw her give her husband a look that suggested that she did in fact appreciate the compliment, but she said nothing further.

There was silence for a few minutes as they ate and read. Finally, James said, "So, Harry, you didn't answer my question, about the Prophet."

"Hmmm? Oh, sorry, I forgot. Yeah, I guess I'll do it. Is it part of the deal that Skeeter gets first dibs on me?"

"Exactly. Wouldn't be worth it to her otherwise. I'll go down to the Prophet after breakfast and tell her she can come. I know you don't like to do that kind of thing."

Harry was about to thank him when someone walked into the kitchen; he was surprised, as he hadn't even heard the fireplace. "Hello, Hestia," James greeted her.

"Morning, sorry to interrupt your breakfast. I wanted to stop by to see how the young Mr. Potter is doing."

Harry remembered that an article almost a year ago, just before Voldemort had taken over the government, had referred to him as 'the young Mr. Potter,' and the other Aurors had taken to calling him that, in fun. He answered in kind. "The young Mr. Potter is doing a lot better than yesterday."

"Good. Now for a few memory tests. What was the code phrase when the Ministry fell?"

"Give me liberty, or give me death."

"Very good. Which Auror said that Cho wasn't pretty enough for you?"

Harry chuckled at the memory. "Stanley."

"Excellent. How many Galleons do you owe me for losing that bet we made two weeks ago?"

"You owe me four Galleons, since I won the bet."

She shook her head sadly. "I see the memory's not completely back yet."

"Very funny. You can owe me if you don't have it now."

"Sorry, Hesty," said an amused James. "I remember it too."

"Well, I tried. Yes, you do seem much better. So, when do you think you can come back?"

"Today, if you want. Is there anything going?"

"No, no ops today, just patrols. A few things are coming together; we might have an op set up in a few days. But not now."

"Sure you don't need me? Get me out of a Skeeter interview."

Hestia laughed. "Sorry, but you will have to submit to another interview after which you will be fulsomely praised by the media. You

can come in tomorrow, in the morning we'll catch you up on what you missed. There should be a new briefing at noon. Enjoy your day, if you can."

"After Skeeter, I might be able to. Thanks, Hestia." She said goodbye and left through the fireplace.

* * * * *

After breakfast, James went to the Prophet and found that Skeeter had been expecting him or Harry to come by. James came back and got Harry, who went with his father to Skeeter's office, where he submitted to a half-hour interview. On leaving, James suggested that they Apparate to a park in Muggle London that they'd gone to a few times before to get away from wizards. Harry agreed, and they got under the Invisibility Cloak and Apparated to what they knew to be a fairly secluded part of the park. Once there, they took the Cloak off and walked around, enjoying the scenery.

"Well, that wasn't so bad, was it?" said his father humorously.

"It was... different than I remember," replied Harry. "Before, she was all insincere, in fourth year, like she wanted me to think that she was my friend. This time, it was like I was being debriefed. All business."

"That's because you have a business relationship," said James. "You're useful to her, she's useful to you. She acts like she doesn't care, and she doesn't, but tomorrow, you'll look like the bravest and strongest wizard since Merlin himself."

Harry shrugged lightly as they walked. He still felt as his mother did—that dealing with Skeeter left a bad taste in the mouth—but didn't protest further, knowing how his father felt, and not wanting to argue. "I guess one good thing about this park is that there won't be dementors around."

"Not that I'd ever run away from them, but for your mother's sake, yes, I agree," allowed James. "And it is very nice, I suppose. It's our first time here since you beat Voldemort, but now that you're even more

famous than you were before, I suspect you may be coming here more often, to get away from it all.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” agreed Harry. “But yes, it is nice. I’m wondering, has it been difficult for you, having a son who’s as famous as I am? I mean, are there problems, things I wouldn’t think of?”

“You mean like, being jealous of your fame?”

“No!” Harry responded, surprised. His father grinned at him. Harry sighed, annoyed at having been taken in. “C’mon, seriously.”

Still smiling, James patted his son’s shoulder. “Sorry, I can’t resist sometimes. But no, not really. The obvious thing is the danger you’re always in. That’s always hard for us, but that’s not directly connected to your fame, as such. It makes our lives... busier, more interesting, maybe more difficult. You could say it affects us as it affects you, on a smaller scale. People talk to us, many of whom we don’t know, tell us we must have done a good job raising you. And when the Prophet was attacking you, the opposite, a lot of people saying we must have fed your ego too much. I had a hard time adapting to that. A hard time not cursing them, you could say. It’s hard when someone attacks your kid; anything bad that happened to you, we felt like it was happening to us. But apart from that, I really couldn’t think of anything.”

Harry nodded. “I guess that makes sense. I just hadn’t really thought about it from your point of view.”

“Almost no kid would,” said his father. “One of the skills you get as an adult is seeing things from another person’s point of view. It doesn’t come naturally to kids, to put it mildly. Looking after yourself is a survival trait; it’s instinctive. Looking at something through another’s eyes is a social skill; it’s good and useful, but not instinctive. I didn’t learn it until well after I was an adult. Some people never learn it.”

Harry was suddenly curious; his father seldom talked to him like this, and it seemed like an opportunity to understand him better. “What made you learn it?”

James gave Harry a slightly abashed grin, as if remembering something he was embarrassed by. "Your mother." They continued walking in silence; Harry understood that his father was thinking about how he wanted to say what he would say, so he waited.

"Your mother, Harry, has the patience of a saint. I was never easy to live with, and sometimes, I'm still not. Oh, I have plenty of good qualities, not least of which is a healthy ego, though that can be both good and bad. You got a lot of my good qualities, but fortunately, not the ego. At Hogwarts, I was thought by many to be an incredible jerk, including your mother to some extent. I could also be charming, and I thought that was what won her over. It turned out I was wrong; what she'd seen was a glimmering of potential that I had, to be a better person. But it would take a lot of work.

"Early on in our relationship, I did a lot of things that upset her. Even though she knew that I wasn't the most sensitive guy in the world, she still couldn't help but be upset at times. She'd get angry, I'd get defensive and angry back, it was a cycle. You almost can't avoid it.

"What gradually happened was that I realized how much what I'd done upset her, and even if it was something I thought she really shouldn't be upset by, the fact was that she was upset. I could either continue to be as I was, and continue to upset her, or I could change, and try not to. But the only way I could change was to understand how she saw the situation, not just how I saw it. And that took a lot of time, and a lot of work. There's something in us that doesn't want to do that. But I loved her, and I didn't want to upset her, so I did it. And the first step in understanding how she saw a situation was understanding her, how she reacted, her feelings, why she saw something differently than I did. That was what got me started.

"Now I'm reasonably good at it, and a lot of arguments that used to happen now don't because I can see the argument approaching, and I change course before it gets there. I don't do what I would have done, or I say something that lets her know I understand her feelings. I can even do it with other people, though only to the extent of how well I know them. You see, everyone sees the world a little differently. The better you know them, the more you can see the same world they see. Some people live in a scary world, where lots of frightening

things happen, a danger behind every door. Some live in a cruel world, where if something bad can happen, it does, or at least seems to. Some live in a nice world, where most things seem to go their way. You live in a world where there's too much attention focused on you, where everyone seems to want something from you, and you wish they'd leave you alone. It's just a little different for everyone."

They were walking along a path now in the main area of the park. Couples were sitting on benches, talking or snuggling. Families were sitting on towels, blankets, or tarp, picnicking. Children were running around; two were throwing a Frisbee back and forth. One threw it far above the other's head; the other ran, but Harry knew he wouldn't catch it. Reaching into the inner pocket of his light jacket, he touched his wand, causing the Frisbee to descend more suddenly. The boy jumped, and made a great catch. Pleased, he ran back to throw it back to his friend. "Now, now, we're among Muggles," murmured an amused James.

"I was careful."

"I know. Just giving you a hard time, on principle."

"How did you know, anyway? It wasn't that obvious."

"I saw your eyes, and I saw your hand move. And it's also what I was just saying, understanding how others think. It just felt like the kind of little thing you would want to do."

"But I've never done anything like that before," protested Harry.

James shook his head. "You've never done that before. You have done things like it before. That's a crucial difference, and key to understanding other people. For example... How would Ron and Hermione react if each of them was given a house-elf?"

"Hmmm... well, Hermione is easy; she'd set it free, or try to persuade it that it should want to be free. She'd never ask it to do anything. Ron... he'd ask it to help his family, especially his mother. But Hermione would want him to set it free, or do what she would do. They might even have fights about it, come to think of it."

“But why does Hermione not try to get you to do the same thing?”

“I’ve actually been a little surprised she hasn’t,” admitted Harry. “I guess it’s because I’m not her boyfriend. She doesn’t expect of me what she does of Ron.”

“And how do you think they reacted to your being made an Auror?”

“Well, they were happy for me.”

“No, I mean, did they have any reactions to that that they didn’t tell you about?”

Puzzled, Harry asked, “How would I know?”

“By knowing them,” said James gently. “You know how Hermione would react to a house-elf because you’ve seen her with them. There might be things they would feel about you that they wouldn’t tell you, for various reasons.

“Now, I can’t say I know for sure, and I don’t know Ron and Hermione nearly as well as you do. But I do, to some degree. I am sure they were both happy for you when you were made an Auror. But I’d be willing to wager that Hermione was worried that it would bring you more danger, but she didn’t say anything because you three were already doing something very dangerous. But she would probably have that reaction. And I’m pretty sure that Ron was envious, at least a little. Ron has probably envied you lots of times that you weren’t aware of. You’re best friends, but you are Harry Potter, and he probably sometimes feels like a second fiddle, or a sidekick. Your being an Auror would just reinforce something like that. Remember when you had that fight in fourth year, after your name came out of the Goblet of Fire? He was jealous because you were a Hogwarts champion. Deep down, he knew that you didn’t put your name into the Goblet. But he couldn’t admit that he was jealous, so his negative feelings came out another way. You find that quite often, people’s feelings, especially anger, get shown one way when the real reason is something very different.”

"I'd never really thought about it like that," said Harry.

"I wouldn't have either, at your age. It's something to keep in mind. The next time somebody blows up at you for what seems like no good reason, or you do at them, it's probably because they were angry at some other thing, and it was something they couldn't tell you about, or didn't realize themselves, or you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Harry looked around at the trees as they walked, the people lunching and playing. What kind of arguments do they get in, wondered Harry. Do they get upset at each other for no reason? Do they realize why they do? I guess it makes sense; I remember when I got mad at Ron and Hermione sometimes in fifth year for things that weren't really their fault, because so many other bad things were happening. "How do you know when that sort of thing is happening to someone else?"

"Experience, knowing the person. Knowing what they get upset at, and thinking about why. Like I said, the better you know the person, the better you can do this. Right now, it's not so critical. Just something to keep in mind."

"I really hope Ron's not that jealous of my being an Auror."

"He'd know he shouldn't be, and he'd get over it," his father assured him. "Sometimes you can't help but think something, even if you'd rather not. I'm sure that now, he wouldn't feel that way."

"I told him I wanted him to apply after Hogwarts, that I wanted him there with me."

"But he didn't get his N.E.W.T.s, because he helped you with Voldemort. He might feel as though that disqualifies him. If you really want him there, you may need to talk to Kingsley and the Aurors, maybe get him special dispensation. It wouldn't be like a special favor; he deserves it, after all he did to help you."

Harry nodded. "I will." He made a mental note to talk to Aurors about it the next day. A thought popped into his head from what his father

had said earlier. "You said that you thought it was your charm that won Mum over, but it wasn't. Can I ask what it was, then?"

James chuckled. "Thought I slipped that one by you." Harry thought about saying that his father didn't have to talk about it if he didn't want to, but he realized that his father was kidding.

"It was in sixth year, late sixth year. I was pretty popular, and as I said, I had an ego to match. Some girls were interested in me, and I was interested in them, though it was more that I enjoyed that they were interested in me. I didn't want to commit to any one person. I wanted Lily, but she wanted nothing to do with me. The fact that she didn't want me probably made me want her more. That, and that she was very pretty. Still is, of course.

"Sirius was also popular, and he had a girl or two. Peter couldn't get a girl, and he was too timid to try anyway. But Remus... even though Sirius was my closest friend, I liked Remus quite a lot. Sirius and I exchanged insults all the time; it was part of how we communicated. I gave Peter a hard time, and he accepted it; I suppose it was just an indication of our relative social status. But I never insulted Remus. Partly because of the werewolf thing, and partly because he was genuinely a nice guy, and I respected him. I was basically a jerk, but I had a real soft spot for him.

"There was a girl he liked, named Sally Partenus. Same year as us, a Hufflepuff. He tried to talk to her a few times, using school stuff as an excuse. She was polite, but no more than that. I told him he should ask her out, but he wouldn't do it. He was afraid of getting into a relationship, mostly because at some point he'd have to tell the girl that he was a werewolf, and the girl would dump him, he was sure. I thought he was wrong, but he wouldn't do it.

"So, in my wisdom, I was sure he needed my help. There was a same-year Hufflepuff girl named Linda who liked me, who I was kind of so-so on. I approached her, and suggested that I'd be happy to go out with her if she'd persuade Sally to go out with Remus. She seemed happy enough, and she accepted. The next day she told me that she'd talked to Sally, who had agreed to go out with Remus. I told Remus to ask Sally out, and promised him she'd say yes. I laid it

on heavy, basically telling him that if he didn't ask her out, it meant he didn't trust me. He finally, reluctantly, agreed to do it."

James's face slowly took on a chagrined expression as he talked. "The next day, I was talking with Sirius, and I told him the whole story. What I didn't know was that I was being overheard. I was crass, saying that I didn't give much of a damn about Linda, but I was happy to be able to help Remus. And... well, you can probably guess where the story goes from there."

Feeling bad for Remus as he spoke, Harry nodded. "It got back to Sally, and when Remus asked her out, she turned him down."

"Turned him down hard," James agreed. "Linda was furious, told Sally, and when Remus asked her, she dumped all over him, read him the riot act. Well, he was crushed. Imagine, the first time you ask a girl out, you're nervous as hell, and this is how she reacts?" James paused; Harry could hear the regret in his father's voice even now, all these years later. "He was inconsolable. Surprisingly, he wasn't all that angry with me; he was too busy beating himself up, saying that he'd never have a girlfriend, that no girl would have him, and he shouldn't have even entertained the thought."

"Well, at first I reacted with my usual bravado. Said she wasn't good enough for him, it was better for him that it was that way, and so forth. Not surprisingly, it didn't do a bit of good. The next day, he didn't go to any of his classes. Said he was sick, but of course, everyone knew better, since Linda and Sally hadn't been shy about talking about what had happened. It started to dawn on me that it was serious, and that I'd let Remus down in a big way. I went to our dormitory, and for probably the first time in my life, apologized. Sincerely, and profusely. I said it was all my fault, that I hadn't been a good friend to him. I even offered to apologize to Sally directly and take responsibility, but he asked me not to, saying it would just make it worse. I spent over an hour talking to him, trying to tell him that he shouldn't give up on it, that it was only me. He was miserable, and so was I. For the first time, I could see the folly of something I'd done, and it killed me. I put up my usual brave front in public, of course."

“A week later, Lily had a private conversation with Remus. She said some of the same stuff I’d told him, that he shouldn’t give up, and so forth. In that conversation, he told her what I’d said, how I’d apologized, the way I’d said it. She was amazed; she didn’t think I had it in me to do that. Because of that, she started to change the way she thought about me. That summer, I decided to have a last gasp at asking her out, after the meeting in which Professor Dumbledore told us we’d be Head Boy and Girl. She accepted, but she never put up with my usual egotistical idiocy; she always put me in my place. But she had accepted. I thought I had won her over. It wasn’t until after we were married that I found out the real reason she’d accepted.”

“Wow,” said Harry. He couldn’t think of anything else to say.

James nodded. “Yes, indeed. ‘Wow’ is a very reasonable reaction. This, my son, is one of the ways we learn. We sometimes do things that hurt the people we care about. With any luck, we make it right, and we learn from it. This was a big one; for all I know, I set him back ten years in dating. It probably had to be that big for it to have any impact on me, the way I was then. I... I made bigger ones than most, but we’re all going to make mistakes. The only question, I’ve discovered, is whether we learn from them or not. Not learning from them is... quite a waste.”

They walked on in silence as Harry thought about what his father had said. He felt bad for Remus, and also for his father; how hard it must be to find that your carelessness and arrogance had caused tremendous pain to a good friend. “I’m trying to think of any mistakes I’ve made that hurt someone I care about.”

James patted his son on the shoulder. “You have the advantage of me here. You’ve made minor mistakes, but nothing on the stupendous scale of mine. You can be careless, but not overly so. You’re definitely not arrogant, as I was.”

“Snape always said I was arrogant,” recalled Harry.

James grunted. “As far as Snape was concerned, you were James Potter with green eyes. He had no idea who you were; he was too

busy seeing me.” As they walked, James seemed to be making a decision. “But, speaking of careless... that comment you made yesterday, about Snape fancying your mother...” Harry felt a sudden flush of shame, hoping he’d caused no problems. “I’m not reprimanding you, since your memory was messed up; it’s not your fault. But that could have caused problems. I... know perfectly well that Snape fancied your mother.”

Harry’s eyebrows went high; he decided to say as little as possible, since this was obviously a sensitive issue between his parents, and he’d already made a mistake regarding it.

“She doesn’t know I know; we’ve reached kind of an unspoken agreement not to talk about it. I assume you know this from what you saw in the memories he gave you when he died.” Harry nodded.

James pointed to an empty bench. “Let’s sit for a bit,” he suggested. They sat, and turning a little to face his son, James continued talking.

“Snape’s death... has forced me to look at a lot of things about my life. Ironically, he was an important person in my life; if you hate someone, you spend a fair amount of time thinking about them. I thought about what I could have done differently with him. I don’t just mean that thing after the O.W.L.s in fifth year that you saw the Pensieve memory of; we already talked about that.” Harry nodded, recalling the conversation with his father at the end of the fifth year, when his father, while not apologetic about his general treatment of Snape, admitted regretting that particular incident. “I mean the whole thing, most all my life. Remus had a much healthier attitude about this than I did; Snape had done almost as much to him as he did to me, but Remus tried hard to work with him when he was DADA teacher in your third year. Snape and I were both stubborn; we couldn’t give up our grudges. In that, at least, we were quite similar.

“Also, it was greatly annoying to me that Snape ended up being on our side after all. I never would have believed it; I was too invested in my own point of view. That’s why it seemed like I didn’t believe you when you told us. I thought you must have somehow been tricked; your mother was very annoyed at me for doubting you. Sometimes I wonder if your mother was the whole reason the rivalry between me

and Snape existed. There's something very... primitive, very evolutionary, about it. Two monkeys fighting over the pretty female. She was there when we first met; maybe we both unconsciously knew that the other liked her, and our fight was about her all along. It's impossible to know, of course, but it would make sense."

"So, what would you do differently with him, if you had it to do again?"

James thought for a minute. "I know what the best thing to do would be. It would be to ignore him as much as possible, not respond to his provocations, and so forth. Consider him a lost cause, not worth wasting breath or energy on. But just because I'm aware of my faults doesn't mean I don't have them. I'm not sure it would have been possible for me to be like that with him. So it's not so much what I would do differently, but what I could do differently. I'm not convinced that it's a hell of a lot."

"Couldn't you and Mum talk about it now, since he's dead?"

"We should be able to," agreed James. "It's just sort of a habit not to. Also," he added with a sheepish grin, "I would have to admit that I was wrong, about him being nothing but evil. So, there's a disincentive for me to do that. But, sad to say, you're right. She won't bring it up; since she was right, she won't want to rub my nose in it. I thought I was going to have to, when you said that yesterday. She pretended not to know, giving me the option to continue ignoring it if I wanted to. But... maybe it's time to clear the air."

Harry was glad his father felt that way; it would certainly be ironic if a truth he'd blurted out carelessly turned out to be something that could bring his parents together on what had been a difficult topic for them. "I'm just glad I didn't cause any trouble."

James shook his head. "Don't worry. But... and speaking of recognizing your mistakes, this is something I wanted to get off my chest... I wanted to apologize to you, about the circumstances of your getting kidnapped."

Very puzzled, Harry looked at his father quizzically. "I'm sure you remember I was with you in Diagon Alley when you were taken. We'd

just finished clearing out Madam Malkin's place, and Kingsley told us it was okay, the dementors were gone. The kid came up to you with the card. I'd already told you, and Ron had as well, not to touch anything that was possibly suspect. But a Chocolate Frog card of you appealed to my ego. I was surprised I hadn't heard about it; I thought they must have started making them after you beat Voldemort. I should have been suspicious, made sure you didn't touch it. Ron stopped you from grabbing the paper airplane; he did a better job of protecting you than I did."

"Dad, it wasn't your fault—"

James waved him off. "Maybe not directly. But I absolutely should have stopped it. The problem is what the item was. If it had been an adult, handing you a piece of parchment, I would have stopped it. I'm sure of that. But a kid, who obviously saw you as a hero, giving you a Chocolate Frog card to sign... if someone had deliberately designed it to get it past me, they couldn't have done it better than that. Now, I know you didn't see it either, but in your case, it was for a different reason. Anyway, after you disappeared, I was really scared. Partly because you were in enemy hands, and partly because... if you had died, I'd never have forgiven myself. I should have stopped it."

"It wouldn't have been your fault," said Harry. James shrugged as if to say, maybe, but I would have felt it was anyway. Harry thought, and asked, "When I faced Voldemort, if he had killed me, would you have blamed yourself because you could have tried harder to stop me, but didn't?"

"Good question," mused James. "I suppose, a little bit, but not that much. I would always blame myself a little if there was anything possible I could have done to stop it. If you died tomorrow in the line of duty, I'd blame myself for letting you be an Auror. But it wouldn't be the same as this, since this was something that, especially after the thing with the paper airplane, shouldn't have been that hard to see coming. We all know being an Auror is dangerous. And maybe facing Voldemort is the same way. You were putting yourself in danger to protect wizarding society. I mean, you had other reasons, not least of which was a strong sense of right and wrong, but protecting society was a strong one, and that's a very laudable goal. I could forgive

myself for allowing you to risk yourself for that kind of a goal, because it's very noble. I myself took risks this time, as you know, and last time Voldemort was around as well. It's part of life. But you did what you should have done, and your mother and I just thank the heavens that you came out of it in one piece."

Harry remembered things he'd read in the Prophet recently. "But speaking of protecting society, I can't help but think of the thing with the dementors. People were getting on Kingsley's back to do something about the dementors, even though he fought Voldemort, and you'd think they'd be more grateful, give him more of a chance. It's like they forgot what he did."

James nodded. "This is a hard thing about life to get used to, and prominent as you are, you'll see it more than other people. Your mother says the Muggle phrase for this is, 'what have you done for me lately.' This may even happen to you one day. Famous and honored as you are, with all that you've done, some people will seem to forget that, and demand this or that of you, or ask you to explain yourself in ways you shouldn't have to. It's almost bound to happen, and you're not even a political figure. Kingsley now is, and in some ways, it's as if his previous service is out the window. If he starts getting people mad, it's his ass. It's not right, but it's the way life is."

Harry shook his head in amazement. How could people be that way? "So why risk yourself, why endure what you endure to fight for them, if their memories are so short? What's the point?"

"That is what you have to decide," said James firmly. "Some people say, to hell with it, if people are going to be like that, then screw them. If you do it for them, you can't expect rewards. You have to do it because it's the right thing to do, the thing that makes you able to look in the mirror every day. Not that you'll never get rewarded, but in a lot of cases, it won't be in proportion to what you've done."

"You could cash out right now, Harry. You could quit the Aurors, get paid to show your face for various high-profile products and companies, live on that and the Merlin First stipend. You could even write a book about your life—not that you ever would—and it would be a huge seller, it would make you rich. You'll never have to worry

about money, in any case, and most people wouldn't blame you. You'd be seen as having done enough. So, why be an Auror? Not for the money; you have enough. Not for the glory and recognition; it's fleeting, and often not enough. For your colleagues? For society? For your own sense of self-satisfaction, self-worth? Because it's what you enjoy doing? That's what you're going to have to decide. Not today or tomorrow, of course, but as time goes by. It's a hard job, a demanding job, an often unappreciated job. Whatever your reason for doing it, it has to come from within you, not from something you'll get externally by doing it."

Harry stared ahead, lost in thought. He felt the breeze of the late spring day, saw it rustle the leaves on the trees. He saw a three-year-old demanding his mother's attention as she gathered up her family's belongings. He imagined similar scenes happening all over the country, all over the world. People doing what they did every day, focused on their own situations, their own problems. If Aurors were fighting Dark wizards, well, that was their job. He saw the people enjoying the pleasant weather, and realized that there were no doubt dozens, maybe hundreds, of wizards in England who would like to be doing the same thing, but couldn't, because of the danger of dementors. He imagined them wondering why something wasn't being done about that, so they could enjoy a simple pleasure to which they'd become accustomed. Would they automatically blame the government for failing to provide the necessary security, or would they consider the situation, and understand why it was difficult for the government to do so right then? He found that he wasn't optimistic. "Are you saying nobody appreciates Aurors?" he asked.

"No, of course not," said James. "Aurors are quite well respected, and as you know, it's a high-prestige job. I'm just saying that people's appreciation isn't something you can count on for job satisfaction. If it's 'I'm happy to protect the people,' then great. If it's 'The people should be happy I'm protecting them,' then you may have a problem."

"I guess I can understand that," said Harry reluctantly. "I'll have to think about that, but I can take my time. It's funny, but I never thought so much about exactly why I wanted to be an Auror. It just seemed like an exciting and worthwhile thing to be doing."

“Well, it is.” James stood, followed by his son, and they walked again. “I just hope you’ll do it for the right reasons, or at least, what for you will be the right reasons. Maybe I’m selfish, but I’d rather you didn’t do it if you weren’t going to be happy in the long run.”

Harry didn’t answer, but instead patted his father’s shoulder with his left hand for a few seconds. He always knew where his parents stood: firmly in his corner.

* * * * *

He spent the next few hours practicing dueling with his father. They had done so in the past, as dueling was one of his father’s many interests; James knew that for his son, dueling could at some point mean the difference between life and death. James had, of course, always won any duel in which both did their best, but since Harry’s short but intense training with the Aurors last year had included heavy emphasis on dueling techniques and practice, Harry’s skill was now almost equal to his father’s. James was surprised and pleased at the level of his son’s ability, and spent time teaching advanced techniques that Harry might not have been able to handle before, but could now. They even talked about it over dinner, to Lily’s amusement.

They continued in the living room after dinner; Lily had to admonish them not to use any actual spells in the living room, because of the presence of vases and other items that could be damaged or broken by an errant spell. “So, when you were doing Auror training, did they spend any time on visual threshold issues?”

Harry frowned, not quite sure what his father meant. “You mean, whether a spell can be seen?”

“Not exactly,” replied James. “Of course you know that most spells can’t be seen by the naked eye, and that it’s only some high-powered spells like the Killing Curse or the Stunning Spell that can be seen, and that even with those it’s possible to eliminate the visual effect by not saying the incantation, which reduces the spell’s power.” Harry nodded; he was well familiar with this information both from the Aurors and his own personal experience. Stunning Spells were red,

Killing Curses were green, and a few spells at high intensity were white, but many could not be seen by the naked eye as they left the wizard's wand. High-level duelists always tried to eliminate the visual effect from their spells, because it was easier for the opponent to dodge or block the spell if he could see it coming. The Aurors had explained that opinions differed on whether a duelist should try to remove the visual effect from all spells, or just some.

"So," continued James, "what I mean when I say 'visual threshold' is that at a certain intensity, some spells become visible, so ideally you want to keep the spell as strong as possible while not being visible. Did the Aurors work with you on that?"

Harry shook his head. "We didn't have quite enough time for that kind of detailed thing, but they did mention it as we went along."

"That makes sense," agreed James. "Well, let's try it a little right now. Aim for that lamp next to the sofa."

"Not funny, James," shouted Lily from the kitchen; she couldn't see them from where she was, but could hear quite well. Harry and James exchanged a grin, and stepped outside, into the back yard.

Twenty minutes into their practice, Lily opened the screen door. "Will you two come in, Kingsley's here." They stepped inside and greeted him; it still seemed to Harry that he should think of Kingsley as an Auror rather than as the Minister. "What are you practicing?" asked Kingsley.

"Visual threshold," replied James. "This was the first time I've practiced with him with him using the Elder Wand, and it's really something. Even if he keeps his Stunners under the visual threshold, they're still tough to block, they sting a bit. I've never seen such a strong Stunner that I couldn't see. Well, you know what I mean. I'll be very interested to find out what Aurors think."

"Yes, there has been a bit of discussion about how Harry will be with that wand," agreed Kingsley. To Harry, he added, "It's a very good thing you weren't using it before, or else the goblins would have it

now. I'm sorry we couldn't retrieve your other wand when we rescued you. I know you preferred not to use this one."

Harry shrugged. "As Hermione pointed out, not using the Elder Wand wasn't the most well-thought-out plan I ever had. Especially being an Auror. Anyway, what's up?"

"Can we sit down?" asked Kingsley. "Lily, too?"

They all sat; Kingsley's expression was unusually serious. "We've been going over the memories of what happened in your captivity. Harry, have you told your parents about what happened at the beginning, when they asked you your name?"

"I haven't talked about it in detail, no. Why?"

To James and Lily, Kingsley explained, "They gave Harry goblin truth serum, which causes pain when the subject lies or refuses to answer. The pain escalates from bad to unbearable, coming close to Cruciatus levels. Harry, when that was happening, it looked as though you were trying to hold your breath. Were you?"

Harry nodded and explained what he had tried to do. "I just did it because I was desperate. I didn't think it would work."

Kingsley shook his head. "It didn't. Five times, the pain became unbearable, and you passed out. Finally, they stopped doing it because their doctor said you might die. You thought you passed out because you were holding your breath, but that wasn't the case. You can't escape torture by doing that. It would be wonderful if you could, but you can't. It was a coincidence that you were trying to hold your breath at the same time."

James looked shocked, and a little angry. "Crucible?" he asked Kingsley.

"We don't know for sure," said Kingsley. "But it almost has to be."

Now his father was definitely angry. "Dumbledore?"

“Again, we don’t know. But yes, I can’t think of any other answer. He must have done it sometime after Voldemort came back; it’s hard to say when. Probably snuck into Gryffindor Tower one night and did it.”

“God damn him!” shouted James as he pounded the arm of the chair he was sitting in. “Playing God again! He didn’t seem to understand that Harry wasn’t his kid!”

“I’m sorry,” said Harry, very confused. “Crucible? I don’t know what that is.”

Kingsley explained as James swore under his breath. “There is no defense, Harry, against the Cruciatus Curse, or chemical tortures such as were done to you by the goblins. But there is a spell, a fairly complex one, called the Crucible, which provides a kind of defense, but at a high cost. When a person is experiencing extremely high levels of pain, the Crucible activates and causes oxygen to stop reaching the brain, which causes the person to pass out. The person wakes up, is tortured again, and it happens again. In essence, it allows a person to resist torture that involves extremely high levels of pain.

“The problem with it, and the reason your father is so angry, is that if the subject is tortured repeatedly, the effect of the Crucible eventually causes death. Death can occur after as few as five repetitions, or as many as fifteen.”

Harry slowly nodded, understanding. “And if Professor Dumbledore did it, it was because he knew I had to die anyway, to get rid of my Horcrux. So, if I was captured, better to die from this Crucible thing than, for example, being tortured into insanity, and the Horcrux would still be safe.”

“Almost certainly, it was to protect you from Voldemort—” started Kingsley.

“Protect him?” interrupted James derisively. “Way to protect him, Dumbledore! Just kill him! Why not?”

“James,” said a concerned Lily. “Please try to calm down.” Fuming, James was silent.

Harry looked at his father solemnly. “Dad... I know why you’re angry. But to be honest, if I’d known the situation, I probably would have had him do it. I would rather die than be tortured into insanity.”

“But it wasn’t his call,” responded James. “I already wasn’t happy with the way he did what he did, not giving you or us any more information than he had to, especially that you would have to die at the end of it. But this is even worse. He seemed to have decided that your life was his to do with as he pleased. You, and we, deserved more information than we got.”

Harry had already had a similar discussion with his parents a few nights after Voldemort’s defeat, in which James made clear his anger with Dumbledore for having decided Harry had to die when, James felt, there were still alternatives. His father had been very angry, while Harry wasn’t, feeling that it had worked out for the best. Harry didn’t agree with his father now, so he decided to remain silent, but even so appreciated his father’s anger on his behalf.

“No argument from me there,” said Kingsley to James. “I came by, Harry, because I thought you probably didn’t know, and I didn’t want you thinking you got out of that by holding your breath. Of course, I very much hope there is no next time, but if there is, that’s not going to work.”

“Won’t this Crucible thing still work?” asked Harry.

“No, it won’t. It can be dormant for as long as ten years, but only lasts anywhere from a week to ten days when first activated by torture. So, it might be gone already, but in a few days, it definitely will be.”

Kingsley stayed for a little while, talking to them about what was happening in the government, and how it was being Minister. Harry thought about finding Dumbledore’s portrait—he wasn’t sure where to find one except Hogwarts or the Wizengamot, neither of which was easily accessible to him—and asking, but he wasn’t sure whether the portrait would know. In any case, the more he thought about it, the

more glad he was that Dumbledore had done it. He didn't want to die, but some things were definitely worse than death.

* * * * *

Harry felt even better the next day, with almost no lingering memory problems. He read the extra copy of the Prophet as he ate breakfast with his parents; as expected, Rita Skeeter's front-page article about Harry's confinement—the first of a three-part series—could hardly have been more flattering. He found that this didn't make him feel any better about what he was doing to make it possible.

Soon after breakfast, he said goodbye to his parents and Apparated to the Park, the nickname of the Aurors' training facility and work area. It wasn't really a park, of course, but it was large and scenic, with quite a few trees and several nice lawns. There were a few buildings, but they were invisible; Harry had never asked why, but he imagined that it was for security purposes. Right then, four Aurors were outside doing a two-against-two combat exercise; Harry held back an urge to say hello, as they needed to concentrate fully on what they were doing.

Having Apparated to a spot close to one of the entrances, he didn't have to walk far to reach the door, which was of course also invisible, but whose location was known to all Aurors by the subtle differences of the foliage in the area closest to it. He pointed his wand at the door and said, "Auror Harry Potter." Where there had been thin air before, there was now a view of the inside of the building, which only he could see; even another Auror standing next to him wouldn't see inside without first giving proper identification.

The room one walked into first was like a large living room, with four sofas and a dozen fairly comfortable chairs scattered around; six Aurors, four men and two women, were there. "Potter!" called out a middle-aged man named Paul Hedghorn. "Had enough vacation time?"

Harry had never cared much for Hedghorn, whose main mode of expression was friendly insults (though many were unsure exactly how friendly they were normally meant to be), but he always tried not

to react to him. He had once, and other Aurors had advised him not to, as that only encouraged Hedghorn. "Hey, Horny," Harry called back, using Hedghorn's nickname. "I wouldn't have minded a few more days of sleep, but I'm not complaining."

"Well, you're an example to us all. I wouldn't have realized it, but Skeeter says so, so it must be true." The one time Harry had been annoyed while reading the article was when Skeeter had written something very much like that.

"Oh, get off it, Horny," said one of the women, who added to Harry, "He only read the article to bother you; we already know what happened, since we got the briefing from your memories. You did good."

"Thanks, Mel," said Harry. "Except for grabbing the card, that is."

She shrugged. "Most of us think that anyone who says they wouldn't have is a liar."

"Except for Mad-Eye," said another older Auror. "We all agree he'd have Stunned the kid." A few other Aurors laughed.

"It's funny because it's true," put in Hedghorn.

"Constant vigilance," said Harry. "That may sink in for me a bit better now." He chatted with them for another few minutes, then left the room, heading for the briefing room. It looked rather like a classroom; there were seven rows of six desks each, and the desks looked like they could have come from any normal university. Harry sat at his, which was in the last row on the far right, as they were arranged by seniority. "Update," he said aloud.

A female voice seemingly came out of nowhere. "Potter kidnap briefing number one—"

"Skip," he instructed. "Skip all Potter kidnap briefings. Display list of remaining briefings."

A list showing the title, date, and time for each briefing hung before him in midair. He pointed his wand at one titled 'Goblin/DE Ties,' and text now hung in the air:

"Word is being put out publicly that the goblins are forming an alliance with surviving Death Eaters. The purposes of this are to: 1) Channel public anger over Potter's kidnapping to all of our current adversaries, especially to help the Minister put off demands for quick action re: dementors, and 2) misdirect DE's into believing we are putting our resources where we are not. The fact is that there is little evidence of Goblin/DE ties, though goblins may have hired a few as mercenaries."

Harry shrugged; this was not a great surprise, and not particularly helpful. He read the other briefings, and was surprised to see the same pattern: unspecific information, most of which could be worked out by reading the Prophet, or with a little insight and guesswork. None of the information was highly sensitive. Mildly disappointed—he'd hoped to learn new information, and felt he'd been let down—he stood and walked to Hestia's office. She was the Head of the Auror Office, appointed by Kingsley, and as such the titular head of the Aurors. Harry knew from experience, however, that the Head of the Auror Office was often not the one who had the most influence; sometimes it was not even an Auror, but rather a politician, who then had very little influence indeed.

The office of the Head of the Auror Office was in two places at once, so to speak: it was at the center of the buildings in the Park, and it was at the Ministry. The office had two doors; one led to the Park, and the other, to the rest of the Ministry. Only Aurors could use the former one, of course.

He saw her walking down the hall when he was most of the way there. "Hestia," he greeted her. "I just saw all the briefings—"

"Not the ones involving your kidnapping," she corrected him; he remembered that which briefings any Auror had read were known by the head of the office. "You should read those, too, even if they're dated; knowing what we knew or didn't know at any time while they had you is important information. Or, it could be, anyway." She

casually grabbed his arm, turned him around, and started heading back to her office; her expression told him to hold any questions until they were alone.

He always noticed the slight change when they walked over the threshold from the Park to her office, but he would have thought it would be a bigger change, as he was traveling dozens of miles with one step. The office was moderately large, with a nice desk, three guest chairs, and two well-stocked bookcases. She waved her wand; he knew she had activated the spell that would foil any surveillance attempts, as she always did when discussing anything of a sensitive nature.

They sat; she let out a small sigh before speaking. "Okay, Harry. What I'm going to say doesn't leave this room, not for anyone, but I assume you already knew that."

Harry nodded; security had been drilled into him when he had joined.

"This is very serious, and it's a very big problem that the Aurors are facing right now," she said gravely. "I think you know through the grapevine that some Aurors went off the reservation during the Voldemort time. Kingsley and I thought we knew who they were, but we were wrong. Taking down the anti-dementor protection for Diagon Alley should have been impossible, or nearly so. Only a few Aurors knew the code that locked it, and we were sure all of them were trustworthy. So, now there are two possibilities: an Auror we trust can't be trusted, or an Auror we trust was overpowered, the information taken, and given a Memory Charm, in which case he or she wasn't up to the level of competence we expect from Aurors. In any case, it's very dangerous. We have to re-evaluate who we absolutely, totally trust. It should go without saying that you're one of those people."

Harry nodded. "And this is why there was nothing interesting in the briefings."

"Yes, that's right. Sad as it is to say, we can't put anything in the briefings that we don't want to get out to our enemies. What's worse, all the Aurors know that; it's more or less an open secret. It's always

been the case that we could trust an Auror implicitly, but to put it mildly, we can't count on that."

"Now, you told me when I joined—remember, this was just after Dumbledore died, a month or so before the Ministry fell—that some Aurors would leave once Voldemort took over to fight him, but some would stay to work against him from the inside, and leave only if asked to do extremely immoral things. Did that not work as well as you thought it would?"

She shook her head. "Not nearly. Some people did all right, but Voldemort was pretty clever. He didn't attack the Aurors with a blunt hammer; he was more subtle. His Head of the Auror Office favored some of the remaining Aurors over the others, creating suspicion and animosity. Some simply did what they were asked to do, their reasoning being that there was no proof that Voldemort had taken over, and following the Head of the Auror Office was their sworn duty.

"But Voldemort was in charge for almost a whole year, and that's a lot of time to try to corrupt people. He got some Aurors under his control by blackmailing them, others by holding relatives or loved ones. Those Aurors did things they regret, and have admitted it to Kingsley, and been forgiven. But some have done things that are unforgivable—killed innocents, for example—and know they can never come back."

He asked his question as she paused. "Why can't he just give them Veritaserum?"

"He can't, at least, not lawfully. As you know, Aurors are granted a great deal of autonomy and trust. The law states that the Minister can't interfere with the Aurors' internal matters. All he can do is appoint a Head of the Auror Office, but that's usually just someone to oversee the Aurors, and convey the Minister's instructions to them. Or, rather, the Minister's objectives. The Head chooses which Aurors go on which missions, coordinates intelligence, and so forth." Harry nodded, having learned a lot of this when he joined. "But in terms of methods, and any sort of serious oversight, the Head can't do much. Aurors are supposed to be trustworthy. Kingsley's still trying to figure out what to do about the situation. Normally, it wouldn't be critical. But

with enemies out there trying to hurt us, it may be. Not having all the Aurors on the same page really hinders our efforts, and makes the efforts of all trustworthy Aurors like you all the more important. We need you.”

Harry nodded somberly. “Of course, I’ll do everything I can.”

“We know. Now, for the real briefing... our agent who has contact with the remaining Death Eaters is onto something, but doesn’t have enough solid information yet. He can only say that the DE’s have a loose organization, and their leaders haven’t been totally decided yet. We assume the eventual leader will be the one who kills his rivals without dying himself. It is actually true, to the best of our knowledge, that there’s no goblin connection. Of course, we can’t rule out the possibility.”

“Do you assume that what the goblin said to me is accurate, or shows their thinking accurately?”

“It is consistent with their actions,” she agreed. “Also, they thought there was no way we could get to you, so it’s reasonable to assume that they weren’t lying to you, or deliberately giving you misinformation. Based on what he said to you, it wouldn’t make sense for them to be helping Dark wizards; to them, apparently, wizards are all the same.

“Anyway, there seems to be an indication of an important project, thought to be a weapon, that Voldemort and the DE’s were working on when he died. The source is hardly sure of this; he gleaned it from bits and pieces of information, and of course was careful not to ask too many questions. He heard a reference to ‘the site,’ suggesting a place where something is happening. Apparently there’s protection in place; he heard the phrase ‘nobody should be able to get through,’ though he only barely overheard it, and can’t be sure that that was what it was referring to.”

Great, thought Harry. Another big danger to worry about. “No indication of what it could be, or what kind of protection there is?”

“No. We can only guess what it might be, so there’s really no point. At no point in the last year did you see anything that could have related to this through your scar connection with Voldemort?”

He searched his memories. “No, I really can’t think of anything. And my memories are almost completely back now, so that’s not a problem. If something comes to mind, of course, I’ll tell you as soon as possible.”

“Thank you, Harry. Well, that’s all I can tell you right now. But, there’s one other thing... this is only a suggestion, but it may not be a bad idea for you to patrol places like Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade—“

“As long as I don’t touch anything.”

She gave him a fleeting look of sympathy. “Yes. The reason is that we need information, and there could be people out there with some who wouldn’t tell someone like me, but would tell Harry Potter. Maybe even hit Knockturn Alley, that sort of thing.”

Harry was surprised. “If I go there, won’t it be pretty obvious that I’m looking for information?”

“Not necessarily. You could just be looking for lawbreakers. Just because you know what you’re looking for doesn’t mean they know what you’re looking for.”

“I guess,” agreed Harry. “Well, somehow I don’t think anyone will come running up with helpful information, but it’s worth a try.”

He spent the next half hour wandering through the Park and talking to Aurors. He had never been able to spend too much time around them—he had only recently joined when he had to go on the run from Voldemort, and there hadn’t been too much time between his week of well-deserved vacation after Voldemort’s defeat and his kidnapping—but he definitely noticed a different atmosphere between the current situation and that of a year ago. Then, Aurors had been casual, friendly, and relaxed even though everyone knew that a dark time was approaching. Now, the casual atmosphere was a little forced, a darker tinge to the joking comments than before. Harry knew that

everyone would know that he was totally trusted by the leadership, since he had been willing to die to make possible Voldemort's death, but no one mentioned it to him. He supposed that anyone who brought it up would only be underlining their possible status as not trusted.

He then did as Hestia had suggested, going to Diagon Alley and walking around for a few hours, then taking a walk through Knockturn Alley as well. He got a hearty welcome from most people he saw in Diagon Alley, and was surprised to get a mostly warm reception in Knockturn Alley as well. Unfortunately, no one offered him any information; even though he knew it had been a longshot, he wondered if anyone might have been dissuaded by the fact that standing near Harry Potter was a good way to get noticed. He decided that he should appear in public more often, so people got used to seeing him, and he wouldn't be such a spectacle.

Aurors didn't punch a clock; his time was his to decide what to do with, in the absence of a specific assignment. He went to Hogsmeade to talk to Aberforth, who had heard nothing of any use to Harry. He decided to break out the Invisibility Cloak and hang out in the Three Broomsticks, hoping to overhear something, but all he heard was personal gossip. I guess Aurors could get pretty well-informed by doing this, he thought. He supposed one never knew when scandalous personal information could come in handy, but it wasn't something he wanted to go out of his way to acquire.

In the late afternoon, he went to the Muggle park he'd gone to with his father, to sit and think undisturbed. He tried to imagine what the Dark wizards were up to, where they might spend their time, and so forth, but came up with no new ideas. He reminded himself that much older, more experienced Aurors were doing no better with this question, and that he couldn't expect too much of himself.

During the past year, it had occurred to him that an invaluable resource for a young Auror was the experience of his comrades, and that he had then looked forward to the future, when he would be able to openly associate with other Aurors after Voldemort's defeat. Now, it had happened, but the cloud that hung over the Aurors discouraged him from doing it. Or, should he anyway? Shouldn't he talk to other

Aurors and ask them for the benefit of their experience whether he was sure they could be trusted or not? He thought about it, and couldn't think of a strong reason why it should hinder him. He resolved to do so the next day.

He finished the working day by returning to the Auror compound and looking around in their library, trying to identify books he wanted to spend some time looking through in the future. Then, he went home, had dinner with his parents and Sirius, and visited with Ron and Hermione for a while. Cho popped over to arrange a date with him for the next evening. The work situation wasn't great, but all in all, it had been a good day, or at least, a normal day. His life seemed to be getting back to normal, finally.

* * * * *

In the room at Auror Headquarters that was never used but for this one purpose, Kingsley watched as scenes from the reality Harry was experiencing sped by within the blue, white, and translucent field of swirling energy. Harry himself lay on a flat surface in the lower portion of the field. Given the speed of the images, Kingsley guessed that time moved perhaps ten times faster within it than in the real world outside it.

Only Aurors, and then only some Aurors, knew of the existence of the field, and even those did not know where it had come from or how it did what it did. They only knew what it did, and a powerful Forgetfulness spell prevented them from telling anyone.

As they had from time to time since he'd decided to place Harry into the field, pangs of guilt and sadness hit him again. Guilt, because what he was asking of Harry, without Harry's consent, was far beyond what almost anyone would consider reasonable. Sadness, because memories of his own experience in the field ten years before kept coming back to him, memories that even after all this time still stabbed at his heart and his conscience. If he succeeds where I failed, thought Kingsley morosely, it'll be even worse for him than it was for me. Hestia worried that he would never forgive me, and I wouldn't blame him. But I had to do what I thought was right. Now, I just wish I

could be absolutely certain that this is, in fact, what's right. My mind says it's right... but my heart most definitely doesn't.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 12, The Life That Could Never Be: His memory damage finally having faded, Harry's idyllic life takes a cruel turn as his duties as an Auror force him to make a terrible choice.

From Chapter 12: Sorry, Harry, but you're not a good liar. I suspected what the field was, and your reactions confirmed it. I don't want to die any more than you do, but we both know it makes more sense for me to go. Not only because you're young and I'm old, but also because I need to prove to myself that I can do the noble thing.

I know you'll do well, because you know how to do the right thing. I hope you'll remember me with compassion. You'll find the thing, and succeed. Good luck.

Chapter 12

The Life That Could Never Be

The next day was gloomy, at least if one looked outside. Dark gray clouds dominated an overcast sky; enough rain drizzled down to be annoying. Well, at least the walk in the park with Dad was nice, thought Harry. He ate breakfast with his parents and read the Prophet as usual, finding himself again annoyed at Skeeter for writing that 'surely no other Auror could have held out against such outrages longer.' He knew she had no basis for saying such a thing, but more importantly, it could easily offend his Auror colleagues. He knew the most he would hear about it would be some teasing, but things like that could have an impact on his relationships with them.

At the Park, he got the newest (and still uninformative) briefing, getting involved in a chat that five of them were having in the briefing room. Someone mentioned in passing the morning's Skeeter article; Harry decided to take the opportunity to express his regret at what Skeeter had written; two of the women waved him off. "To tell you the truth, I'm not sure she was wrong," said one, a mid-thirties woman named Stephanie. "You held up amazingly well."

"Well, the point is she shouldn't have written it that way, and I wish she hadn't," said Harry. "It's like I think I'm better than the rest of you."

"If anyone thinks you think that, then they have their head up their ass, because they want to think badly of you," she said firmly. "We all know how Skeeter is; you really shouldn't worry about it."

"What are you up to today?" another asked.

"Going to check the library for a few things, maybe do another patrol through Diagon Alley. Let people get used to seeing me there."

After a few more minutes of conversation, he walked over to the library, where he saw a gray-haired, slightly paunchy man in one of the comfortable chairs, reading a book. "Hello, Robert," Harry greeted him.

“Harry,” Spencer returned the greeting briefly before getting back to his book. It occurred to Harry that Spencer was the type whom it would be good to ask a few things, so he decided to see if Spencer minded being bothered.

“Robert, do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

Seeming slightly surprised, Spencer placed a bookmark in his book and closed it. “Sure. What is it?”

“Well, I didn’t have much of a chance when I started to do this kind of thing, but I wondered if you might tell me some of the kinds of stuff that an Auror needs to know, but I don’t know yet. That sort of thing.”

Spencer paused; Harry wondered what he was thinking. “Is it me for any particular reason?”

Harry shook his head. “I’m sure I’ll be asking a few people.” Deciding to make a joke as he’d seen Aurors do in similar situations, he added, “But I wanted to ask you first, because you’re obviously the smartest Auror.” He hoped his tone made it clear that it was a joke.

Spencer didn’t smile, but Harry thought he saw amusement in Spencer’s eyes. “And the one most susceptible to insincere flattery.”

“Whatever you say,” said Harry.

Now, Spencer smiled. “Sure, what the hell. I have nothing better to do. But I’d rather not talk here; I don’t want people coming in here and second-guessing whatever I’m telling you. ‘Oh, no, Robert, don’t tell him that. I have a story that’s much more pertinent.’ That sort of thing. We’ll go out into the beautiful sunshine.”

“Sounds good. Where’s that?”

“We can imagine it, anyway. I’ll escort you, I know where I’m going.”

Harry nodded, and tried to keep off his face his sudden unease with putting himself in anyone else’s hands; if Spencer were hostile, he could take Harry anywhere, and probably overpower him. Harry

reminded himself that he had asked Spencer for advice, and Spencer had a point. Spencer held on to Harry's right arm, and they Disapparated.

They Apparated into what appeared to be countryside; it looked very nice, and no doubt would have been beautiful were it not for the current weather. There was a large, grassy field with several cows grazing, and a few small hills with just two or three trees on each one, one of them obviously at least a hundred years old, judging by its size. It seemed like an appropriate scene for a Muggle picture postcard.

Spencer nodded. "Beautiful, isn't it? My mother is a Muggle-born; this is her hereditary property. I have two brothers; one of them takes care of the place, and her, since she's rather getting on."

"You weren't harassed about her birth?"

Spencer shook his head, and they started walking. Spencer conjured what looked like an oversized umbrella, the kind one saw on beaches to provide shade, made it invisible, and it hovered with them as they walked. "Of course, we knew that the Ministry would fall, and that they'd be targeting anyone with Muggle connections. Not everyone happens to know everyone else's birth status, and some of us—Aurors and other powerful people—were able to have our records falsified. As far as the Thicknesse government was concerned, I was a pure-blood.

"Now, before I forget, two things before we really start. One is to say that after what happened, with the card, it'd be very understandable that you'd be gun-shy about going someplace where you don't know where you're going, with someone you don't know that you can trust 100%."

Harry cut in before Spencer could continue. "I wouldn't have come here if I didn't—"

"Relax, Harry. You can admit something that's perfectly obvious, and anyone who knows what's what won't be offended. You can't be 100% sure, is all I'm saying. You simply don't know me well enough. Anyone in my position who got offended would be someone who

didn't want to admit the truth, either because they had issues, or they wanted to deceive you in some way. If someone is pretending that something that's true isn't, you want to think about why. That's a good thing to keep in mind, both for being an Auror and for life in general.

"As I was saying before I was rudely interrupted," he went on as Harry gave him a small smile, "when I suggested coming out here, your eyes showed that you were nervous for just a flash. Then you were back to your normal face. That's understandable, as I said. The point is that especially in dealing with people in your capacity as an Auror, you have to keep any surprise off your face, even that very understandable flash. You need to react as if you knew perfectly well what they were going to say, even if they say Fudge and Thicknesse were having a wild homosexual affair. You just nod, like, of course, or like, that's bullshit, but either way, you're not surprised. By the way, you know the joke about that, right?" Harry shook his head. "That's why I picked those two," explained Spencer. "The joke going around the Aurors after Thicknesse was put in was that they were having an affair because Pius liked the Thicknesse of Cornelius's Fudge."

Harry winced and giggled at the same time. "Yeah, I know," said Spencer. "The maturity level of the joke is about first year at Hogwarts. But we're all human, and we all like stupid jokes once in a while. Especially a disgusting one like that, it reminds us not to take ourselves too seriously. Just an opinion here, but anyone who turns his nose up at that joke is trying too hard to persuade people of something. The type who'd never admit that he ever farted or picked his nose. That's worth knowing too.

"In fact, and I'm getting away from part of my topic here, but I'll get back to it... a large part of what's important to know as an Auror is to know people, to understand people. The paper credentials, the N.E.W.T.s, are... well, maybe not crap, as I was going to say, but definitely less important than things like judgment, people skills, and character. Who knows how many good Aurors we've missed out on because of idiots at the Ministry imposing these rules on us. The stuff you learn on the N.E.W.T.s, we can teach. The things I mentioned, you either have them or you don't. Anyway, you have to understand psychology. Why do people act in certain ways? What motivates them? Are you a friend or enemy to them, in their eyes? You want to

get in their shoes, see things through their eyes. If you can, if you can understand them, you can better predict how they'll react to any particular thing, and the more effective an Auror you'll be."

"This is the kind of thing I've never been all that good at," admitted Harry.

"Well, you're young," pointed out Spencer. "Most people your age don't get this stuff. But I think you will, with time. The thing that gives me hope about you—it's not the bravery or the toughness, or the crap that Skeeter writes about. It's that you don't pretend to be someone you're not. You ask for help, and you're sincere. You don't let what Skeeter writes go to your head. When the whole society is telling you how great you are, it would be easy to believe it; you don't. Don't let that change, and you'll be all right." Harry nodded, but was silent, having nothing to say.

"There's a book in the library, called 'Why We Do What We Do,' that I'd recommend you take a look at. Nothing can teach you like experience, but it'll tell you some things to look for. Now, do you know why understanding people is so important?"

Harry nodded, remembering his trip to Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley the day before. "An important job for Aurors is intelligence gathering."

"That's right. Everyone knows you're an Auror, and generally, Aurors are trusted. Most people understand you won't use the information they give you in a way that'll hurt them. But some people will lie to you, and some will tell you a half-truth, which is even more dangerous. If you can understand them, it'll save you a lot of grief."

A question popped into Harry's head. "Why do people become Dark wizards?"

Spencer chuckled lightly. "If we knew the answer to that, we could make sure parents did what they should do, and we could all go home. Well, not really, but it seems that way."

“That’s a good question, Harry. Most people wouldn’t ask it, because it seems to betray a lack of sophistication, but it’s the question you and every Auror should be asking. The basic answer is, we don’t know. There seem to be two basic factors: one’s childhood, and one’s inborn character. I have a friend who is a living, breathing argument that inborn character trumps how one was raised—it’s a long story—while your friend Draco Malfoy,” as Harry understood from the wry glance that the word ‘friend’ had been used ironically, “seems to indicate that the reverse is true. Personally, I feel that both are important, and either or both can be responsible. Someone who’s a psychopath, who seems to have been that way from very early on, that’s someone who it’s going to be hard to change.” Harry thought about the memories of the very young Tom Riddle he’d seen. “But someone who’s gone to the Dark side because he was raised that way, I think that’s someone you have a hope of reaching, of changing.

“Now, another part of the answer to your question is that Dark magic is powerful, and it might appeal not only to those two groups, but also to people who might think of themselves as good, but victimized. They rationalize that they’re just protecting themselves, but it’s more that they’re angry, and Dark magic appeals to people’s anger. There’s much more, of course, but you could probably look at almost any Dark wizard and see at least one of the three things I just mentioned in his life.”

Harry thought about the few Dark wizards he knew well enough to make any kind of judgment. It seemed that Voldemort was in the first category, Draco Malfoy in the second, and Snape perhaps in the third. He wondered with discomfort how much his father’s actions as a child had led to Snape’s turn toward darkness. Had the encounter on the Hogwarts Express stirred such anger in Snape that the Hat had put him in Slytherin when he could have ended up in Ravenclaw? No one could know, of course, but it was both sad and interesting to consider.

“Thanks. That sounds useful,” said Harry. He thought about his next question as they walked in silence. “So, about half of the Aurors left to fight Voldemort, and half stayed on, to work against him from the inside. You were one of the ones who stayed, right? Were you and the others able to accomplish anything?”

Spencer didn't react immediately, but Harry thought he saw a flicker of sadness cross the older man's face. He let out a sigh, and started his answer. "That, Harry, was one of the worst judgments the Aurors made in the time I was there. At the time, Kingsley said we should all leave, and in retrospect, he was right. There was a reasonable tactical case to be made for staying, but I have to admit that I stayed not because I thought it was the right thing to do. Fundamentally, I did it because I didn't want to be on the run. I had a quiet, pleasant life with many creature comforts. I didn't want to lose that, so I convinced myself that staying was a good idea.

"Here's another bit of advice, Harry. When you reach a decision, especially a moral one, if you're uncomfortable with it, re-examine it carefully. If you're uncomfortable, it may be because your conscience thinks it's a bad idea, and your ego is trying to override your conscience. Judging from your recent actions, you seem like the type who listens to his conscience over his ego, but it's still a good idea to be watchful. We're all human, and subject to many temptations."

They had reached the top of a small hill that provided a very nice view of the ranch and the area surrounding it. "I often used to come out here and sit," said Spencer as he conjured two chairs and took a seat in one as Harry did likewise. "It's a good place to clear your mind. Sometimes it's a good idea to get away from everything in your life, have some time alone, even if it's only a few hours. You go through your life every day focusing on the details, and sometimes you don't think about the big picture. What's important in your life, what you want to accomplish, and so forth."

Spencer paused, and Harry knew he was going to get back to the story. "So, I stayed, figuring I could always leave if things got bad. But Voldemort was clever; his Head of the Auror Office didn't do anything startling, or make any sudden changes. Nobody was asked what happened to those who left, as we expected to be. Nobody was prevented from doing their job, even if it meant catching Dark wizards. Of course, if we did, and turned them over to the political people, they were soon released. But no one interfered with us directly.

"It wasn't for a couple of months that things started to slowly change. Some of us, including me, got a raise in salary. I should have realized

then that I was among those being targeted, but I hadn't had a raise for a while, so I didn't think about it much. They had evidently made judgments about who they thought they could corrupt, and who they couldn't. The ones they could, they started treating better than the others. Meetings with high Ministry officials, asking if there was anything they could do for us, gifts they pretended were worthless but were actually quite valuable, things like that." Spencer paused hesitantly, then added, "Once, a woman who found me unaccountably attractive, and was more than eager to go home with me. It all happened so gradually that it was easy not to notice, even though I'm not so foolish to think that a woman thirty years younger than me thought I was irresistible. This kind of thing, by the way, is one type of the Auror character tests they give when you're young. When I was young, I would've passed it, turned her down. But when you're older, your ego gets weaker in certain areas. You have a stronger need to feel that you're still attractive to women. At this point, I think the Auror test should be given occasionally throughout one's career, not only when you're training." He let out a wry chuckle. "Constant vigilance, as Alastor would have said. Even twenty years ago, I'd have passed this test."

"Did she do anything?" asked Harry.

"Oh, yes. She did a lot."

"No, I mean—"

"I know what you mean. No, not in the way you mean. In that sense, it wasn't a trap. It was, of course, in a larger sense. Harry... did anyone direct you to me in any way, say, you should talk to Robert?"

Surprised, Harry shook his head. "No."

"And you had no idea whether I was one of the ones who could be trusted?"

"I wasn't thinking about it like that," said Harry. "I just thought there were people I could learn from, whether or not they had done anything bad during the Voldemort time. I guess I just thought of them as two separate things."

"I can understand that," said Spencer thoughtfully. "It's very... non-judgmental of you, in a way. And ironically, you can probably learn more from those who can't be trusted, or those who failed in a way I suspect you wouldn't. We learn more from our failures than our successes.

"I asked the question because I thought Kingsley might have sent you to me. It wouldn't be unreasonable for him to have done so, though it would be a bit of an intrusion, which is probably why he didn't do it. The story I'm about to tell you, I told him a few days after you did in Voldemort. Because I did that, I believe I'm considered to be trustworthy. I can't know for sure, of course. I didn't tell him because I wanted to be considered trustworthy, though; I did it because I thought I needed to tell someone, almost like a confession. It was him because he's now Minister, and I thought he should know the true status of all the Aurors.

"I'm telling you, Harry, because one day, you'll be the leader of the Aurors. I don't mean the Head of the Auror Office, though you may be that too. I mean that you'll be looked up to, respected by the others. Your example will be followed; other Aurors will look to you for leadership. You need to know where people can go wrong, how it happens. It can be piece by piece, or it can be all at once."

Harry remained silent as Spencer again paused. "One night, about three months ago, one of the Ministry people who'd been wining and dining me took me to dinner, and after dinner, said he had something he wanted me to see. We took a Portkey to a room, one with no windows. There were a few pieces of furniture, and a bed; it was as if it was someone's den, or extra room.

"Then another man came into the room, obviously a Death Eater, though he wasn't familiar to me. He was holding onto the arm of a young woman whose wrists were tied together with rope. She looked barely old enough to be of age; I don't know whether she was or not. And... they had removed all of her clothes."

Harry shuddered as Spencer continued. "I realized at once what they had in mind. I won't bother reciting the whole conversation, but

basically the Death Eater said that I was moving up in the world, that I would be becoming very valuable to the government, and the young woman was a present to commemorate my new importance.

"I tried to bluff my way out of it, saying that I'd get on with it as soon as they left the room, but the Death Eater wasn't buying it. He said, no, he had to watch. He said there was no problem doing it while someone was watching, and that he'd be happy to demonstrate. I told him he didn't need to.

"I asked what would happen if I didn't do it. He said he would kill me, then have his way with her, and none too gently. So, this is my problem: he says that, but she's his prisoner. He can have his way with her any time he wants—it's not as though he's going to refrain because of anything I do—so that's not really the threat. The threat is that if I don't do it, he's going to kill me. That's really what it boils down to." Harry found himself not wanting to hear the rest of the story, but he knew he should listen. He almost asked for the woman's name or a description, but quickly decided against it. It was better that he didn't know.

"Now, before I continue, let me ask you, Harry... what would you have done, in this situation?"

The first thought that crossed Harry's mind was that he never would have allowed the situation to come to that, but he knew that wasn't the point behind Spencer's question. "I wouldn't have done it."

Spencer nodded. "I thought as much. Now, imagine this scenario. Same thing, except they tell you that if you don't do what they want, they'll torture her, use the Cruciatus Curse on her until she goes crazy. What would you do?"

"They did that?"

"I didn't say that. I'm asking, what would you do."

Harry thought; it was a difficult question. How to choose between rape and torture, both unspeakable acts? Would I be responsible for the result that she'll suffer whichever way I choose? Or is it just

something they're doing to her, and using me to decide is like flipping a coin? Rape is horrible, but going crazy pretty much has to be worse. What if it was going to happen to Cho, or Hermione, what would I do?

He found himself unable to decide. "I don't know. A lot would depend on what I thought the woman wanted, or rather, was most afraid of. I'd lean towards doing it, though I doubt I could actually manage it."

"Understandable," agreed Spencer. "To answer your question, no, they didn't do that. But afterwards, I thought about that scenario, and lots of other similar ones. I told myself that they were doing this to her, that I was just the instrument they chose. Maybe I prefer to think about the scenario I gave you because there, the case for doing what they demanded is a lot stronger.

"What got to me more than anything else was the girl herself. I walked closer to her, I'm not sure why. She looked like she'd been held for some time; she was pale and thin, a little too thin. You'd expect a girl who'd been through what she had to be terrified, cowering, in fear, that sort of thing. And she was, obviously, very unhappy with the situation. But she was less afraid than I was. When I got close to her, she spoke in the lightest whisper, so only I could hear her. She said, 'please do it.' And her eyes..." Spencer looked down, and closed his eyes for a moment. "I saw her eyes, and I knew without a doubt that she wasn't asking me to do it because of what they might do to her. She was asking because of what they might do to me. I couldn't believe the bravery I saw there. Under normal circumstances, it would be humbling. Under these circumstances... it was all I could do not to break down. It's like... a light, a glimmer of the best of humanity, in a very dark place. Like you, walking out to that forest to meet your fate.

"Unfortunately, I'm not nearly as brave as you are, or as she is. I believe, after many sleepless nights, that if I had it to do again, I wouldn't do it. But it seemed I wasn't quite ready to die right then. I hoped I physically wouldn't be able to, but of course there's a spell that changes that, and the Death Eater did it on me. So, God help me, I did it. I just focused on trying not to cry, and getting it over with as soon as possible."

Very affected by the story, Harry wasn't sure what to think. He was sure he wouldn't have done it, but found it difficult to judge the older Auror. He asked the question that came to his mind. "Why did they have you do that? I mean, what was the purpose?"

"The purpose, Harry, was to corrupt me. They hoped I would do it willingly, in which case I would really be one of them. A few Aurors did, or did that kind of thing, willingly. Even though I didn't do it willingly, I did it, and they took images, images which they could obviously make public any time. But it was not only the images, it was... the fact that I did it, even to save my own life, is a stain. They know that; it's the whole point. They may not be able to make you evil, like them, but if they can make you do evil things, they're halfway home."

There was silence for a minute; the two didn't make eye contact. Harry gazed into the distance, watching the cows. "Do you think," he asked, "that the Death Eaters had already... used her for that before, that it wasn't the first time that had happened to her?"

"You mean, had she already been raped," said Spencer. "I know 'rape' is an ugly word, but let's call a thing what it is. I only hesitate to apply it to what I did because my action was coerced. Maybe I'm just fooling myself. But to answer the question... yes, of course, almost certainly. These are Death Eaters, Harry. They're evil. Do you think they're going to refrain from raping a female captive because of gentlemanly impulses? I know, you're young, you don't have much experience with this kind of thing, and Hogwarts doesn't really teach it. But I would be very surprised if that young woman had not been raped many times before they brought her into that room."

Deeply saddened at the thought, Harry realized that it made sense. He felt he wanted to ask more about what had been going on in Spencer's mind when he made the decision, but realized that it would be much like when he tried to answer Gleason's question about going into the forest; it was just something that either you could do, or you couldn't. He thought about why Spencer had told him the story, and decided to have a guess. "I guess the point of your story is that we

have ideals of how we want to behave, but we don't always do as well as we'd hope?"

Spencer let out a light chuckle. "That's a kind way of putting it. Yes, that's one reason. Another is that because you're young, you may not understand that not everyone is like you; not everyone would be brave in that situation. But the main thing is what I said before, about your future. If you're the Auror leader, you may have to deal with a situation like mine. You need to understand both human frailty, and the need for redemption in the face of failure. I can't undo what I did. But I hope that someday, in a similar situation, I may make a better choice. Now, not everyone is like this. Some Aurors did worse things than I did, and rationalize it better to themselves. They can sleep at night. But a fundamentally good person can do a very bad thing, and want nothing more than to make it right. We come in all sizes and shapes, in terms of morality and strength of character.

"One more thing I'll say, before I'm done with this, hopefully never to speak about it again. If I ever see again the Death Eater involved in that event, I'll kill him. No doubt about it. I wouldn't care if I spent the rest of my life in prison, though I'm sure Kingsley would pardon me. And if I ever meet that young woman again... it would be a struggle not to run from the room in shame. I know she would, and does, forgive me; in a sense, she did even before it happened. In her eyes, I would be a victim as well. But it would still be difficult to face her."

Harry could well imagine that, and wondered how well he'd be able to sleep if he had done what Spencer had. Even considering Spencer's stated reason, Harry was still surprised that Spencer had told him what he had, as it was so personal and shameful. He imagined it was for somewhat the same reason that some Muggles went to priests and confessed their sins. Still...

He decided to change the topic, and ask no more questions about what Spencer had talked about. "Why do you assume I'll be the leader of the Aurors someday?"

Spencer stood, as did Harry, and they walked again, the invisible umbrella following them as the rain picked up. "To me, and I think most Aurors, it seems obvious, but I suppose I can understand why

it's not to you. Not that you didn't have help, but you saved our society, our freedom. It's a certainty that you'll be written about in history books; what you did will always be remembered. It's natural that you'll be highly respected, and once you have some experience under your belt, even those older than you will respect your opinions and tend to defer to your judgment. And they may have used a fake Chocolate Frog card to get you, but I'm sure that the real one isn't far behind."

Harry shook his head. "It's all still a little hard to accept. I admit, I get this kind of thing whenever I go to Diagon Alley, but still..." He trailed off and shrugged.

"Well, maybe it's better not to accept it. Just be who you are, go about your business, and let that take care of itself. So, is there any other advice I can give you besides 'don't allow yourself to become slowly corrupted by evil?'"

Harry smiled at the joke, then quickly wiped it off his face as he realized Spencer might not have meant for him to smile. "I don't know what to ask. Just whatever you think might be useful."

Spencer thought for a moment. "The advice I'd give to you, Harry Potter, will be a bit different than it would be to any usual young Auror. Besides, of course, that I would tell you that story. But for you, I'd say that you should cultivate relationships, friendships if possible, with powerful people. If an Auror is well-connected politically, he can be more effective. It shouldn't be that way, but it is, and you have the potential to be as well-connected as you want to be."

"Well, I'm friends with the Minister," Harry pointed out with a straight face.

"Yes, like that," agreed Spencer. "That helps. But you know what I mean. Aside from that... this shouldn't be too hard for you, but always remember that as an Auror, your job is to serve the people. No matter how famous and honored you become, no matter how rich or powerful, if you stop wanting to serve the people, then you should quit being an Auror. Recent events, of course, have reminded me of that. That's what it's all about."

“Another would be, get to know your fellow Aurors. Lately, we hadn’t had as good personal connections as we’ve had in the past, and I think that hurt us. If we’d been more cohesive, we might have done better during the past year. So, make it your business to get to know the people who join after you. Welcome them, and don’t take an attitude just because you’re older than them. There are some here who do that—“

“You mean, like Horny,” Harry interrupted.

Spencer chuckled. “Well, he’s kind of a special case. He doesn’t discriminate, he gets on everybody. Always with humor, though it does get a bit tiresome. And he may dish it out, but he can take it too. No, I meant—“

Spencer cut himself off as Harry felt what seemed like mild static electricity on the back of his left hand; it pulsed on and off. Not unlike the way Voldemort had summoned Death Eaters by means of their tattoos, it meant the Auror was supposed to report to a special briefing room at the Park. “You too?” asked Spencer. Harry nodded. They reached for their wands and Disapparated.

Specifically designed for briefings, the room was completely white, with no chairs or furniture. Only important, time-critical briefings were held there, so everyone stood while listening; it emphasized that time was of the essence. The room’s size was magically adjustable, so it could hold all forty-two Aurors if necessary. It was smaller than usual; a second after Harry arrived, he saw nine other Aurors, and no more arrived.

Hestia faced them and spoke. “There’s no time to lose. Get your brooms and get back here, instantly.”

Harry Disapparated to his bedroom at his home, snatched the broom where it hung on the wall—Aurors were warned to be prepared for such emergencies—and was back in the room in less than five seconds. Fast as he was, half of the Aurors were already back with their brooms; the slowest one was two seconds slower than Harry.

“Someone with critical information just got away from us, but we were able to put a TT on him.” A TT was a temporary trace, a spell that allowed a person to be tracked, but for no more than a minute. “He Apparated to the south coast.”

“Dover?” asked Spencer. Harry realized that in going to the point in England closest to France, the man was trying to leave the country. A person could Apparate anywhere in their own country, but each country put up Apparition barriers preventing Apparition from one country to another.

Hestia nodded. “The trace is gone, but he had to be heading to France. He’ll hop on a broom, cross the Channel at its narrowest point. A Portkey is being set up at the coast. With any luck, he won’t have more than a couple minutes’ head start. Let’s hope he isn’t on a Firebolt.”

If he is, we won’t catch him, thought Harry. All the Aurors had Firebolts provided by the Ministry, but Harry preferred to use the one Sirius had given him. He realized that the target, not being able to Apparate across the Channel, hoped to reach France as soon as possible, and then be able to Apparate, where he would be lost in Europe, undetectable.

“We using magic detectors?” asked another Auror, referring to the small, portable devices that allowed some types of magic use to be detected within a certain radius.

Hestia nodded. “Your vision will have a greater range than the detectors, but it can’t hurt. They should be arriving any second.” Sure enough, an Auror assistant Apparated in with a tray with twelve detectors; every Auror Summoned one and attached it to his or her arm, then set it to not detect any magic done by any person or item in that room.

Another Auror assistant Apparated in, holding a wooden wheel with multiple pegs sticking out from the edge, resembling somewhat a skipper’s wheel on old sailing ships. Its purpose, of course, was multi-person Portkey travel. The Aurors formed a circle, and each gripped one of the pegs. “Portus,” said the assistant.

The next thing Harry knew, he was standing on a beach, breathing ocean air. They dropped the Portkey as Hestia pointed her wand; a thick red beam came shooting out. "This direction leads to the nearest point of the coast of France. Fan out a bit, but be sure not to neglect the middle."

The ten Aurors who had been summoned mounted their brooms and took off. Harry headed towards the left side of the beam; as he ascended, he wondered exactly how long it would take the rain to drench his clothes. Even though it was only a light rain, he knew it wouldn't take long. There were spells one could do to protect from it, such as a moving shield, but they slowed down the rider, and right then, that was unacceptable. Getting wet wasn't going to stop an Auror from doing what was necessary, but it was annoying.

Harry knew that this kind of pursuit was something that was practiced in Auror training, but unfortunately, his training had been brief and cursory, as there had been little time for him to be properly trained. He remembered the days after Dumbledore's death, Kingsley approaching him to join the Aurors; he had eagerly accepted, mainly in the hope of tracking down and capturing the man who had betrayed and killed Dumbledore. He could never have believed that while Snape had done the latter, he had never done the former.

He tried to take his mind off such ruminations, and pay attention to what he was doing. He knew he'd been chosen both because he was trusted and because he was a good flier, but there were many things to keep in mind. He had to vary his altitude, as it would do no good to pass their target only to fly a mile under him and so miss him. He also had to stay at the proper distance from those on either side of him, and focus on going as fast as possible. Given the vast amount of possible vertical airspace, catching him would be a stroke of luck.

He also realized as he flew that in terms of varying his altitude, he faced an unfortunate trade-off: the more he did that, the less chance there was of overtaking the target. Annoyed, he decided to settle on an altitude of a few thousand feet and hope for the best. Three minutes into the trip, he was indeed soaked. He focused harder on maintaining full speed while constantly looking around him, and into

the distance. He realized he was flying higher than most of the other Aurors, and supposed that his Seeker experience gave him greater confidence that he could spot a distant object while on a broom at full speed. He was sure that even if the target was close to the ground, he would still see him.

Two minutes later, he thought he saw something in the far distance, high above him. He wasn't sure if it was a bird, but he knew he had to find out. He started ascending, and after thirty seconds, he was sure that it was a person, and that it wasn't an Auror. He knew he had to alert the others, but he wasn't sure of the best way to go about it. He decided to shoot a beam of light, as Hestia had done, right at the target to signal the Aurors where they should head.

The target immediately started to descend at a 45-degree angle. Harry was surprised, as he was still below the target, and this would help him close the distance more quickly. He saw the Aurors start to converge, but as they also were coming from angles, he would reach the target first.

The target had now descended to the same altitude as Harry, who was now only about ten seconds behind him, though at broom speeds of up to 45 mph, that was still a fair distance. The man continued to descend; Harry decided to remain at his current altitude, or descend very slowly. He felt his priority now was to stay with the man, to make sure he could catch him as he was about to land. He could not, of course, be allowed to land. Harry hoped to be at the top of a circle of Aurors that the target couldn't escape.

As the coast of France loomed closer, the target continued to race downwards, still at a 45-degree angle, now perhaps 1000 feet from the ground. The man's current angle of descent wouldn't take him to the coast, so Harry assumed that he would level out over water once he reached sea level.

The other Aurors were getting closer, but Harry was surprised by their angles of approach: he had thought they would fan out around the target, creating a circle with the target at the center. Instead, they were heading for the spot on the ocean that his current trajectory was taking him; they intended to intercept him rather than trap him. Harry

suddenly realized that he might be doing something wrong, and decided to change his tactics. He went into a dive, going straight towards the ocean as fast as he could, then altered his trajectory slightly to be on an intercept course. He was gaining, and had now closed to within a few hundred feet, mostly above and a little behind the target.

The man looked around, saw Harry, and did something Harry didn't expect: he dove straight down. Harry continued to follow him, but was sure he wouldn't be able to reach him before he reached the surface of the Channel. But what good would it do him? There was nowhere to go; he was as good as trapped.

Suddenly, Harry heard a magnified voice. "Harry! Stun him!" shouted one of the closing Aurors. He thought, why would I do that? The fall would kill the guy, and we need his information. Also, a hit from this distance would be a huge stroke of luck. But the target immediately started twisting and weaving, trying to avoid the incoming Stunner he expected. Deciding to do as he was told, Harry started firing Stunners, hoping to get lucky. As the target continued evasive maneuvers, though he was still headed straight down, Harry gained more ground.

The target was now perhaps a few hundred feet from the surface of the water; Harry wondered when the man would pull out of his dive, but he still continued straight down, and the other Aurors wouldn't get there in time to intercept him. Suddenly, it dawned on Harry: the man didn't intend to pull out of the dive, but intended to commit suicide by plowing into the water at full speed. Kicking himself for not having realized it before, Harry focused harder on the Stunners... the man would hit the water in less than ten seconds...

Finally, a Stunner found its target; the man went sprawling, separated from his broom; he fell to the ocean, but not as fast. Harry zoomed in to catch him, but he wouldn't be able to. The best he could do was the spell that Dumbledore had used to break his fall in that Quidditch match in third year... the man continued falling, slightly more slowly... another Auror got close enough to add his spell to Harry's, as the man got to within ten feet of the water... he fell in with a splash, Harry hoping frantically that whatever information the man had was not to be lost. The two nearest Aurors levitated the man's body from the

water; one checked to make sure he could breathe. He signaled to the others that the man was still alive, and pointed to the coast of France, to which they were clearly supposed to proceed. Grim, forgetting that he was soaked to the skin and quite cold, Harry hoped for the best as he pulled alongside his comrades.

Landing in France, they were met by French Aurors, who had been alerted by their English counterparts. A Portkey had been set up; Harry imagined that it wasn't uncommon for the French and British wizarding governments to cooperate in such circumstances. After their captive was given first aid, they all took the Portkey back to the Park, where the captive was taken to the medical facility. Expecting to be debriefed, Harry was simply told to go home, change his clothes, and wait for further instructions. They came a half an hour later, when Hestia came by to tell him to report to the Auror Office. He did, and was surprised to be met there by a familiar face.

"Kingsley! What are you doing here?"

Kingsley shrugged. "Just because I'm Minister, it doesn't mean I can't poke my head into Auror business from time to time."

"Not that I care," said Harry. "I just thought you weren't supposed to."

"I'm not, but I can for important circumstances."

"Oh, yeah, did they get any information from him?"

"Well, that's important too," agreed Kingsley, "but that wasn't what I meant. I was referring to this, talking to you."

"Why is talking to me important?"

Kingsley gestured for Harry to sit in one of the guest chairs, and took another for himself. "Because I'm somewhat responsible. I had a lot to do with making you an Auror, and so I take a strong interest in your training. I've seen some memories from the others who went, and you're here to get the after-action briefing." Harry nodded, silent.

"First of all, you did a good job spotting him. You've got good eyes."

Harry's eyes narrowed in puzzlement. "I wear glasses."

"You've got good Quidditch eyes," Kingsley clarified. "One of the reasons you were sent. That, and you're a good flier, which you also demonstrated."

"However, when you found him, the thing to do wasn't to point the light at him. You should have slowly approached him, tried to get under him without getting too close, and shot lights at your colleagues when he wasn't looking. He still might have seen it, but he might not have. By pointing it at him, you let him know you'd seen him, and allowed him to take counter-measures." Embarrassed, Harry nodded.

Kingsley noticed his expression, and his tone softened. "One thing I want to make very clear, Harry, is that I'm not here to criticize you. Even if you were a regular Auror, this meeting's purpose isn't to criticize, it's to inform. You find out what you did well, what you could have done better, and you learn. You do better next time; you don't linger on your mistakes. And, especially you. You had almost no training, and training is when you learn stuff like this. Okay?"

Harry nodded again, trying to rein in his emotional reactions. Spencer's advice about having a poker face popped into his mind.

"Good. Now, there's one other thing you could have done differently, but I think you worked it out. So, what was it?"

"It didn't occur to me that he'd try to kill himself."

"Correct. Again, not the kind of thing we'd expect you to work out at this point, but trained Aurors know they have to be ready for that in any chase."

"So, he was an enemy, and tried to kill himself so we wouldn't get his information?"

"No, not exactly. He was our informant."

"I don't understand. Why did he...?"

"Informants are often not the bravest people in the world, Harry," said Kingsley wryly. "Sometimes they change their minds about wanting to help you if the consequences get too heavy for them."

"What could be a heavier consequence than dying?"

"Well, that wasn't his preferred plan, of course," clarified Kingsley. "But it's possible to deduce it at this point, though you may not be able to, as you don't have enough general background knowledge."

"First, it's possible that he wanted to skip the country on general principle, feeling that he'd be in danger just by giving us the information. He might be afraid that he would be subject to capture and torture by Dark wizards. If he betrayed them, they might make his death prolonged and horrific, so dying might be better."

"The other possibility that can be deduced is that he heard the information, somehow let us know that he had it, but was then given a Memory Charm. He knows it's extremely important information, but he doesn't remember what it is. Do you know how Memory Charms can be broken?"

Harry remembered Voldemort talking about one way, but he hoped it wasn't what Kingsley would say. "With gentle, patient questioning?"

Kingsley grinned. "Good one. No, I'm afraid it is what you think it is. The Cruciatus Curse, applied in a certain way."

"Yeah, but we wouldn't do that." Kingsley stared at him levelly. "Would we?"

Kingsley took a deep breath. "Of course, we'd prefer not to. But we know how to do it; it's not quite as bad as when Voldemort does it. The person ends up with a neurotic condition which can manifest in any of various ways, or with bad luck, a psychotic condition. But they're basically sane, and can live a life. Aurors have done it, very rarely, and the person to whom it's done is provided with lifetime financial support. Not that that makes it all right, of course. But

sometimes, we need to get information that can save many lives. Nobody likes the idea. But sometimes it's necessary."

Harry almost didn't say what came to his mind, but he strongly disliked what Kingsley was saying. "I'm sure there were people, are people, who say that about the dementors guarding Azkaban. That a few criminals slowly going insane was worth the safety it provided all of us. How is this different?"

Kingsley looked at him unhappily. "That's a different situation. I'm not saying you're wrong—"

"The principle is the same."

"I suppose it is," agreed Kingsley reluctantly. "And I suppose you're going to say that if my grandfather had had this done to him and was never the same, I'd be unalterably opposed to it."

"Well, I hadn't gotten that far," admitted Harry. "But... yeah."

"I don't know what to say, Harry. Each situation has to be judged on its own merits. I just don't think we can say that it's something that should never be done under any circumstances. And the worst part is that sometimes when we do it, we don't know if it was really worth it until after it's done."

"And you're doing it right now," said Harry, trying to keep his emotions under wraps.

"Not yet, but as soon as possible. I'm going to tell you the story, as much as we know. This person, the one you caught, was an informant for money. Not a bad guy, but not good either. Think about Mundungus, and you're in the ballpark, ethically speaking. He was performing a service for some of the Death Eaters; he had a way to signal us that he'd found something very important, something to the vague intelligence we had that they were working on a weapon of some sort. He did, but before we could get to him, they put a Memory Charm on him; we imagine that someone said something careless in his presence, then corrected it with a Memory Charm. Realizing he'd been given a Memory Charm, and knowing what we might do—and

no doubt thinking it would be done the way Voldemort did it to Bertha Jorkins—he tried to flee the country.

“We probably would have started already, but he was injured in the fall into the Channel; there was a broken leg, a few broken ribs, and other minor injuries. Those have to be dealt with before we can do anything.”

“And you’re sure that he has information worth permanently damaging someone?”

“His actions speak for themselves, Harry. He obviously thinks so.”

“How can he know what information he has?”

“Memory Charms are quirky sometimes. You can remember fragments, or the emotional impact. If I did something that scared the crap out of you, then gave you a Memory Charm, you might remember that you were very scared, just not of what.”

Impassive, Harry asked, “Is there anything else you need to tell me?”

Kingsley shook his head. “Just that except for the things I mentioned, you did quite well in the chase. You showed good tactical instincts. Once you get the training all Aurors get before they become full-fledged Aurors, you’ll be pretty damn good. Apart from that... no, no particular assignment. I don’t know how long it’ll take to get the information; just keep in mind that if the information we get is urgent, there could be a sudden operation. So, as always, you could be called on at a moment’s notice.”

Harry was surprised. “You really might put me into an operation? Even though my training is, you know, almost nothing?”

“It depends on what the operation entails, what is being asked of the Aurors who are called on,” said Kingsley. “Your only disadvantage is your lack of training and experience. Your advantages are your flying ability, your uncommon bravery, and that you’re utterly trustworthy. Of course, when we choose whom to send on a mission, all such things are weighed.”

Makes sense, Harry thought. He was just about to leave when he remembered something he'd wanted to ask about. "Oh, yeah, I wanted to ask about Ron. I—"

"I knew you'd be asking that sooner or later," Kingsley interrupted him. "He wants to be an Auror?"

Harry nodded. "I know he doesn't have the N.E.W.T.s, but I thought, considering the reason for that—"

"Yeah, I know. What I'll tell you is this: we're going to be recruiting fairly soon; we want to beef up our numbers, given what we lost in the Voldemort time. We may be revoking, at least temporarily, some of the requirements. So, he can be considered in the same way that anyone else would be. Of course, what he did in the past year with you helps his case. But the fact that he's your personal friend isn't going to tip the scales."

Harry supposed he couldn't ask for too much more. "Okay, well... I guess I'll be going, then."

Kingsley nodded. "Thank you, Harry. Good job today."

Harry Disapparated to the Park; he found himself outside, with no other Aurors in sight. That suited Harry, as he didn't feel up for much conversation right then, or more advice from older Aurors. He already had more than enough to think about.

* * * * *

Having just said goodnight to Cho, Harry Apparated into the living room of his home at a quarter after ten. His parents were on the sofa, obviously in the middle of a conversation. "Well," said James. "How was the date?"

Harry paused slightly. "Pretty good."

His father picked up on the pause. "But not as good as it could have been?"

Not sure what to say for a moment, Harry shrugged. "It just seemed like... the conversation during dinner, and before... and after... I don't know, it was like we couldn't connect, or something. The stuff she wanted to talk about was stuff with her friends that seemed silly to me. I didn't say that, of course, but I felt like it was just trivial stuff, nonsense. Who got mad at who, and why, and how it affected everyone she knows. And there was stuff about entertainers, and hairstyles... she had a new hairstyle, and I didn't notice, and she wasn't happy about that."

"Ah, this brings back memories," said James wryly, earning him a sour look from Lily. "Did you blame it on your memory?"

"Yes—"

"Good man."

"—and I told her she looked good no matter what her hairstyle was—"

"Good try, but I bet that didn't do it."

Harry couldn't help but smile at his father's teasing tone. "No, it didn't, but it helped a little. She said it's not a matter of whether I prefer one over the other, but that she worked hard on it, and wanted it to be recognized." He rolled his eyes.

"Well, honey, it's understandable," put in his mother. "Girls, especially at that age, care a lot about that kind of thing. They know boys don't care, but part of a relationship is recognizing what's important to the other person, and taking it seriously even if it's not something that's important to you."

"But, Mum, they're—" Harry cut himself off as he realized he had to be careful what he said. He held a hand up to indicate that he was thinking. "Something that could be pretty important happened today at work, and it was one of those things that makes you have to think about what's right and wrong, that kind of thing. A little bit like whether it's okay for the dementors to stay in Azkaban even though they hurt people. I was thinking about it for a few hours, and it's the

kind of thing I really wish I could talk about with you. But my day was like that, all this heavy stuff is on my mind, and all she wants to talk about is hairstyles, and who likes what?"

His parents exchanged a more serious look at their son's distress. "I'm sorry, Harry," said Lily. "I can understand how that must have felt. It can really be a challenge for couples to deal with this kind of situation. And it doesn't help that because you're an Auror, you can't really talk about a lot of what you do."

"Did you tell her how you felt?" asked James.

"A little... but maybe not as much as I should have," admitted Harry. "I just didn't want to get into the whole thing, make a big deal of it."

James gave his son a serious look. "Some things, Harry, are big deals. They need to be dealt with. Not that you had to do it this evening, especially with how you felt. But at some point, it may be a good idea to talk about this."

"Did things end okay?" asked Lily.

"Well, after we ate, we Apparated off to someplace private," admitted Harry, trying not to appear embarrassed.

"Ah," said James, with a small grin. "So, things got a bit better."

"You could say that," agreed Harry.

"Well, that always helps. Doesn't it, dear."

"I have no idea what you are talking about, James Potter."

Harry grinned. "Thanks, you guys. I feel a little better."

He started to head upstairs, but his father spoke. "Harry, I just thought you should know... your mother and I have been talking about Snape."

Very pleased, Harry nodded. "I understand." He continued upstairs to get ready for bed.

* * * * *

As he ate breakfast the next morning, Harry read with annoyance the last of Skeeter's three-part series about his abduction. "Oh, come on," he said aloud, speaking to no one in particular. "Listen to this: 'Harry Potter has shown once again what true heroism is. Even in the darkest captivity, with all hope seemingly lost, he never lost his faith; he fought until the end for what he believed, for all of us. We are truly gifted to have one such as him in our midst.'" He put down the paper and looked at his parents expectantly.

They exchanged a look, and his father answered. "And what exactly is your problem with what she wrote?" he asked, deadpan.

Harry sighed. "Very funny. 'What he believed? Faith?' I'm just stubborn! I don't know what I believe, or what I have faith in! Where does she get this?"

"She pulls it right out of her—"

"James!"

"Imagination, I was going to say," James protested.

"You're not fooling anyone, you know," responded Lily. "I'm sorry, Harry. But this is just what she does. Even if she writes the truth, she embellishes it, like a drama—"

"More like a melodrama," put in James.

"Yes, exactly," agreed Lily. "She just makes up details, to make it a good story, like fiction. She's good at it, which is why she's popular. I think her standard is that she doesn't deliberately write untruths, but if she doesn't know, she says whatever she wants. I once heard her say, 'A good reporter knows how to extrapolate.' I think sometimes she doesn't want to know the whole truth, so she has more freedom to 'extrapolate.'"

Harry rolled his eyes and turned the page of the paper. He caught his father's eye for a second, and he wondered if his father thought Harry was blaming him for the article, as he had encouraged Harry to agree to such articles for the sake of his public image. His inclination was to complain about it a little more, just to get it out of his system, but decided not to for his father's sake. Instead, he turned the page of the paper and saw an article about the Wizarding Unity Department, titled "WUD Growing Pains" with the smaller headline, "Scarce Resources, D/D Attacks, Indifference Hobble Weasley's Efforts." Annoyed at the negative reference to Ron's father in the headline, Harry read the article, to find that Arthur was actually painted in a reasonably positive light as doing the best he could with what he had. The article said that Muggle-borns were still not satisfied with what progress had been made on their behalf, but didn't hold it against Arthur, knowing that he was trying very hard to help them.

After reading a few more articles and talking to his parents, he prepared to leave. "If you can," said James casually, "try not to make any plans for tonight."

"Why not?" asked Harry, surprised.

"Your birthday. Remember?"

It suddenly dawned on Harry; it was a strange thing to forget. "Oh, that's right. You're not planning on a big party, are you?"

As soon as the question was out of his mouth, Harry realized that his father would turn his answer into a joke, and he was right. "No more than a hundred people, I promise," said James solemnly.

Well used to his father's sense of humor, Harry responded in kind. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch that. You said, no more than ten people?"

James smiled. "Yes, that's what I said," he replied, his tone assuring Harry that this answer was the truth.

"Thanks. I appreciate it." Looking forward to a quiet evening later with family and friends, Harry Apparated away.

* * * * *

He spent the morning at the Park, mostly in the library, talking to other Aurors. He'd started by asking another Auror for guidance; they had stayed in the library, other Aurors had come in, and the conversation soon evolved into the sort of debate that Spencer had wanted to avoid the day before.

The topic of the debate was mainly the question of what were the most important things for a new Auror to learn, both magical and non-magical. To Harry's surprise, most Aurors felt that the non-magical was more important than the magical, and most agreed with Spencer that understanding psychology was extremely important. "Don't get me wrong," said one. "The magic is very important, and you'll have to spend long hours studying and practicing it. But you just can't be a very effective Auror if you don't have a good understanding of how people work." A few told stories that illustrated their points.

After lunch, Harry did a Diagon Alley patrol, then visited Hogsmeade, spending a little while at both the Three Broomsticks and the Hog's Head. In the middle of a conversation with Aberforth, he felt the signal of a summons from Auror headquarters. Hastily excusing himself, he Disapparated away.

In the briefing room, Harry again found about ten Aurors present; he wondered if that was all that was needed for the operation, or if there were only ten that could be fully trusted. Again, Spencer was present. Everyone stood, facing Hestia and, to Harry's surprise, Kingsley, who spoke first.

"Okay, first... technically, I'm not supposed to be here, since I'm the Minister. But I'll occasionally take advantage of the fact that I'm the first Minister in a few hundred years who was also an Auror, and this operation is extremely important. We've classified it as Alpha-priority."

Harry hated to display his ignorance, but he couldn't let it go by. He raised his hand. "I'm sorry, Kingsley, but I don't know—"

"It's okay," Kingsley interrupted him. "Alpha-priority means that literally, nothing is more important. You break any law, do any spell, take any morally questionable action, even any morally reprehensible action, to do what needs to be done. Do you understand?"

His eyebrows rising involuntarily, Harry nodded. Kingsley continued. "We were able to break through the Memory Charm, and we don't know every single bit of information about this, but we know enough to do something about it.

"The objective is to deactivate a device, concealed behind heavy fortifications, which some time tonight—we believe it's midnight, but we can't be sure—will go into operation. The device will release into the air a substance which has the property of infecting with a fatal disease only those people who have the gene to do magic. Muggles will be unaffected, but almost all wizards will die. That's why this is an Alpha-priority: this is a direct and serious threat to our society's survival. If the device goes off, that's that."

A female Auror spoke. "I suppose there's no chance of an evacuation."

"No," Kingsley responded. "Too many people, too little time, and given the circumstances, no country would accept that many people—or any people, with any possibility of this being infectious, which we don't know. Not to mention that there would be chaos, panic. You are, of course, to tell no one—not even your families. They share the same risk as everyone else, and the way to save them is to find this and deactivate it." Harry tried to suppress a shudder; he was used to risking himself, but rarely had his family been in any direct danger. He knew he would do whatever it took to protect them.

"I assume," said Spencer, "that this was prepared by Voldemort, and activated by the Death Eaters very recently?"

Kingsley nodded. "Almost certainly. Voldemort apparently spent much of the last year setting it up as his defense against an insurrection. If his government was pushed out of power, or his grip on power was threatened, he would set off the device—which has a one-day delay

for this very purpose—and get himself and those loyal to him out of the country, and stay out until the substance was no longer dangerous, maybe a month. He and the others would then come back, set up shop, get to work subjugating Muggles, and so forth.

“Now, as for the defenses you’ll be facing, there will be no direct human opposition; all Death Eaters and their allies have fled the country. This has been confirmed by other sources as well. But there are automatic defenses, and very nasty ones. The device itself is deep in the Caves of Eternity.” Harry knew from Hogwarts that this was a group of caves, or one very large cave, that was unknown to Muggles because the entrance was disguised by magic. The entrance was on a rocky cliff near the sea.

“For about a mile in all directions from the mouth of the cave, there are an unknown but large number of Shooting Stars stationed in the airspace.” Harry wasn’t very familiar with them, but knew from things his father had told him that they were balls of magical energy that shot some of their energy at anyone who came within a certain radius. “We need Aurors who are highly maneuverable on brooms. It will be possible, though difficult, to maneuver through the Stars and reach the mouth of the cave safely.”

Harry saw some of the Aurors exchange dubious looks; Kingsley clearly did as well. “To say this won’t be easy will be putting it mildly. I would be surprised if all of you made it back safely from this mission, and I regret having to ask this of you. With more time, we could do this more safely. But we just don’t have that time.

“Once you reach the mouth of the cave, and you’re out of range of the Stars, there may be one or two magical defenses near the entrance, and you have to watch out for whatever they might be. We weren’t able to get that information, but we can hope that a high-level Reveal Magic spell would do the trick. But, as you know, the further into the cave you get, the more unreliable magic becomes, which is why you can’t Apparate in or out. You have to make your way through the cave, a distance of about one and a half miles. There are a few sharp drops of about ten feet, and you can’t count on magic to help you through them.

“Once you get to the end, we understand, stopping the release of the material is surprisingly simple. There’s a valve you need to switch from the open position to the closed position, and a large canister of the dangerous material. You simply need to close the lid and lock it. Taking care of both the valve and the canister is necessary because after we have more time, we’ll send in a proper team to deal with it in a slow and careful manner, including slowly destroying all the Shooting Stars. If you don’t both close the lid and turn off the valve, their job will be very difficult and dangerous; some would probably die who otherwise wouldn’t.”

The female Auror named Mel raised her hand. “This is Muggle machinery?” Kingsley nodded. “Why go to such trouble to set it up there? Surely there must have been any number of ways—“

Kingsley cut her off. “I’d think so too, but we don’t have the luxury of wondering about that now. Strange or not, this is the situation. Your supplies are as follows: one One-Way Teleporter each, set to take you to the Park. It should still work from deep inside the cave; after you’ve done what you need to do, you should use this to return. But always keep in mind, if you’re tempted for whatever reason to use it before the mission is accomplished... once you use it, that’s it, there no getting back in there. The mission is over, failed.” The Aurors’ expressions didn’t change; clearly nobody contemplated doing such a thing.

“Also, each person will have one of these,” he added, holding up a long, thin Muggle flashlight. “More than halfway in, you won’t be able to get much, if any, light from your wands. Without this, you won’t be able to see your hand in front of your face. It will be absolutely vital equipment once you’re in there, since without it, you’d be likely to take a wrong step, fall, and injure yourself.

“All right. Time is a factor, since we don’t know exactly how much of it we have. Keeping that in mind, are there any questions?” No one spoke. “All right. You’ll get your brooms, come right back here, and we’ll take the Portkey to the departure site.”

Harry Disapparated to his bedroom. As he grabbed his Firebolt, he repressed an urge to say something to his parents, in case he didn’t

make it back. He had to know, and so did they, that his not coming back was a possibility every day. Some assignments, like this one, were dangerous, but he had to have faith that he would see them again.

In a second, he was back in the briefing room, the last to return. He grasped a peg on the Portkey, and his world spun. Suddenly, he was on a beach, but the shore could best be described as rocky, as the water that came in hit small rocks rather than sand. The skies were still gray, but at least it wasn't raining. It was windy and cool, cooler than usual for a spring day.

Kingsley spoke again. "You'll be in teams of two, each approaching from a different angle. From the south, Stanton and Lunus. From the southeast, Hedghorn and Fromant. From the east, Potter and Lewis. From the northeast, Yardlington and Spencer. From the north, Harris and Johnson. Double-check your equipment, and take off. Good luck."

Harry double-checked, and found his teleporter and his flashlight secure in the inner pockets of his robes; he knew he might have to perform aerial maneuvers, but he was confident they wouldn't fall out. He exchanged a look with his partner, a thirty-year-old Auror named Daniel Lewis. Without another look at Kingsley or the other Aurors, Harry mounted his broom, kicked off the ground, and headed northeast.

As he flew, he thought about how he would deal with the Shooting Stars, though he knew it depended on what the concentration of the devices was. He thought about the people who loved him, who might never see him again... He swiftly banished the thought from his mind. I have to focus, he thought. I have to think only about getting this done. People are counting on me, even if they don't know it right now. Thousands of lives could depend on what I do in the next few hours. I just have to trust my instincts on a broom. I can't worry about Daniel, and he can't worry about me. I guess they had us go in teams of two so the Stars will have to divide their firepower, but maybe more and we'd bump into each other.

Before he knew it, about five minutes later, he had reached the point from which he and Lewis would approach directly from the east. In the distance, he could barely see the cave, but he knew where it was. He exchanged another look with Lewis, and they headed towards the cave, Harry on the left, Lewis on the right.

After only two minutes of flying, he saw the first of the Shooting Stars, hovering in the air. Okay, he thought, time to concentrate. This is a lot like Quidditch; I just have to be aware of what's going on around me at all times, take looks back occasionally, but not for longer than a half a second, or something'll come at me from the front that I wasn't looking at.

As the approached the nearest one, he slowed down a little; it would be easy to dodge one, and he wanted to see how fast the energy would come at him. It opened fire when he got to within ten meters. He dodged it with little difficulty, but was surprised at its speed. He hovered near it to find out how often it would fire; it fired again two seconds later. Hmmm, not going to be easy, he thought. He could see the second one about twenty meters ahead, so he had to imagine that he would always be in range of at least one, and probably more than one, if they were layered in all three dimensions in the same way, none more than twenty meters from another vertically or horizontally.

That thing fires fast, he thought, so I'd better fly fast, or at least, as fast as I can without running into a shot I didn't see coming. Let's see, same altitude as the cave mouth, eight or nine meters above the ones shooting from below so I don't have to worry about the ones from above... okay, stop thinking so much. You're not going to do this by analyzing every tiny little move. You go in, your instincts will take over, you'll do what's necessary. Like those video games Muggle kids play. Let's go...

He flew in, twisting and dodging everything fired at him. He had passed three when he noticed that they were in a pattern, each the same distance from the others, in vertical and horizontal lines. He realized that it wouldn't be so difficult; he could fly in a particular pattern, and he would be fine once he learned the pattern. Up a foot, then to the side, straight, down, up, repeat. He tried hard not to

change his speed, which would change the pattern he had adopted. He focused on repeating the pattern, repeating the pattern...

After about three minutes, something happened that almost caused him to panic: suddenly the Stars were no longer in a neat pattern, but were spread around in a scattershot pattern. No Star was closer than about fifteen meters to another—he recalled hearing that they couldn't be closer to each other than a certain distance—but they were now totally random, and he realized that he had to snap out of his pattern and fly completely by the seat of his pants. He heard a sharp cry of pain, and realized that Lewis had been hit.

It was like flying by intuition; there was simply no time to consciously note and evaluate every Star, every firing pattern. His flying reflexes took over, and he knew his only job was to step aside, to keep his conscious mind out of it. His father had once said that the way to lose in Quidditch was by thinking too much. He didn't think; he just flew.

The mouth of the cave was getting closer, but he couldn't think about that either. He dodged and weaved, dodged and weaved... past this one, past that one... one Star at a time... a bolt of energy flew by his head, missing by inches, had to be some luck to this... almost there, keep focusing... two more, don't slow down... there's Robert standing at the mouth of the cave, on the cliff, wow, that was fast... don't slow down, one more... past the final one... Yes! Did it. He pumped his fist as he flew over to where Spencer was standing, and dismounted the Firebolt. He felt like grinning, but didn't; there was still hard work to do; still, he felt that he'd gotten through the worst of it.

Spencer reached out to shake Harry's hand. "Should've known you'd get through it, I've heard about your flying skill. I guess Lewis didn't make it." Harry solemnly shook his head. "No, neither did Yardlington. That was nasty, when they suddenly changed. That's when you have to be both good and lucky." They stood silently and waited for others to join them, looking out into the field of Shooting Stars, Harry wondering how the Death Eaters got a hold of so many. Thank goodness we've got the teleport devices to get back, he thought; I wouldn't want to try to fly through that again. Two Aurors dead already...

After two minutes, one intact team of two made it through: Paul Hedghorn and Melanie Fromant. They landed near the edge of the cliff and dismounted, exchanging looks of greeting with Harry and Spencer. For three minutes they waited, silent. Finally, Hedghorn said, "Looks like we're going to be the only ones."

"Looks that way," agreed Spencer. "Fortunately, we should be more than enough to do the job."

Hedghorn glanced around warily as he and Fromant moved toward Harry and Spencer; Harry wondered what Hedghorn expected to see.

Hedghorn suddenly stopped and pointed his wand over Fromant's shoulder, in the direction of the Shooting Stars. "Look out!" he exclaimed.

Harry and Spencer quickly pointed their wands off to their left, where Hedghorn had pointed his; as they did so, Hedghorn quickly pointed his wand at Spencer and fired silently; Spencer went down in a heap. Shocked, Harry pointed his wand at Hedghorn, but he had already shoved Fromant in front of him, his wand shoved roughly at her face, the tip under her chin.

Damn it, thought Harry, suddenly feeling the huge weight of the mission on his shoulders. If Hedghorn stopped Harry, tens of thousands of wizards would die... Alpha Priority... He liked Mel, but instantly understood that he had to do whatever it took for the mission to succeed, painful as it might be.

"Put your wand down, Potter," said Hedghorn calmly. "The wand, and your flashlight."

Harry knew he could do neither. He took a few steps closer to Hedghorn, who reacted by pushing the wand harder under Fromant's chin; she grunted from the pain. "Don't do it—" She continued speaking, but had clearly been Silenced. Hedghorn reached into her robes, found her flashlight, and tossed it off the cliff, which was five meters behind him. Fromant had stopped trying to speak, but her expression told Harry the same thing her words had.

“You know I can’t do that,” said Harry.

“You’ll watch her die?” retorted Hedghorn.

“If we don’t get to that thing, we’re all dead,” responded Harry.

Hedghorn shook his head. “We have these convenient teleporters,” he pointed out. “Here’s the only way you’re going to live, Harry. I’ll allow you to teleport away, right now. You’ll have time to get your family, any friends you want, out of the country. I’ll send back Robert, and Mel here, after knocking her unconscious, to give myself time to get away. That’s the deal, and it’s the only one you’ve got.”

“And I should take the word of someone who’ll be responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of people.”

Hedghorn shrugged. “I have no reason to lie. All I care about is that the thing goes off, for which I’m being very well paid. I don’t care if anyone or no one dies, so long as I’ve done my job.”

“And you don’t care if every wizard in England is killed?”

It chilled Harry to look into Hedghorn’s eyes and realize that he already knew the answer to the question. “One thing I learned in the past year is that we’re all going to die, it’s just a question of when. Everyone looks out for himself; that’s the way humans are, and have always been. Once you have blood on your hands, it doesn’t matter much whether it’s the blood of one, or a hundred thousand.”

Great, thought Harry. They corrupted him, and good. He wanted to try to talk Hedghorn out of it, but realized he probably couldn’t. He adjusted the direction of his wand slightly; Hedghorn moved the wand to point it directly into Fromant’s back, and stood behind her so that any kind of shot was impossible.

Fromant immediately gave Harry a significant look, and started mouthing words slowly and deliberately, with exaggerated mouth movements. Harry felt he should be able to decipher her meaning, but couldn’t. He continued watching her lips and mouth as Hedghorn spoke again.

“C’mon, Potter,” said Hedghorn impatiently. “You don’t even have to throw down your wand. Just teleport away. If you don’t do it very soon, I’ll start firing on you, and you won’t be able to do much to me, as I have a shield.”

Two similar mouth movements from Fromant came in a row, and Harry suddenly realized she had mouthed ‘five’ and ‘four’; she was counting down from ten. Meeting Fromant’s eyes, he said, “I understand,” intending for it to be misunderstood by Hedghorn as agreement to his demands.

Three... two... mouthed Fromant as Harry, trying to appear casual and defeated, lowered his wand and reached into his robes for his teleporter. He took it out... she mouthed the word ‘one’...

She whirled into action, spinning away from Hedghorn as Harry quickly raised his wand and fired at where an instant ago her body had been blocking his shot at Hedghorn. Harry’s Stunner hit Hedghorn in the shoulder; he went down, but so did Fromant, who apparently hadn’t been able to get out of the way quite fast enough. She fell on her face; Harry ran over, only to turn away quickly when he saw the terrible damage that Hedghorn had done to her back, no doubt with a Reductor Curse. Harry was sure she was dead. Reflexively, he put the unconscious Hedghorn in a Full-Body Bind. He went over to Spencer to try to revive him, but was unsuccessful.

He sat on a small boulder at the cave entrance to consider what to do next. Should he wait until Spencer could be revived, or go into the cave without him? And what about Hedghorn? As to his disposition, Harry found that he was reaching a very unsavory conclusion. Hedghorn simply could not be left where he was, no matter how well wrapped, cursed, or whatever, and he couldn’t be taken along, only partly because magic would become undependable at some point. If there was even the tiniest chance that he could free himself, or somehow be freed—or maybe another Auror would make it through the Stars after having been delayed, find Hedghorn, and be lied to regarding what had happened and free him—given the stakes of the situation, it simply couldn’t be risked. Harry felt a sinking, awful feeling in his stomach as he realized what needed to be done.

He spent a few more minutes considering the situation. Was there no other way? He looked at it from all angles he could think of, and it kept coming back to the notion that, however humanitarian, nothing could be done that increased by even a tiny amount the chance that the mission would fail. Alpha Priority: nothing is more important than the success of the mission.

His heart heavy, Harry stood and slowly walked over to where Hedghorn lay. He paused, thinking, then had the thought: just do it, it isn't going to get any easier standing here thinking about it. He was a few meters away from Hedghorn, and couldn't see the other man's eyes, whether he was now conscious in the Full-Body Bind. He decided not to look; maybe it was better not to know. Just do what needs to be done, he thought. His stomach giving a lurch, he caused Hedghorn's body to levitate, move a few meters back and to the right... and after another, agonizing pause, he released his spell, and Hedghorn, still frozen in place by the Bind, plunged over the edge of the cliff. Harry saw the light from one or more of the Shooting Stars firing at the falling figure.

Feeling as though he would be sick, he staggered back to the boulder on which he'd sat, and put his head in his hands after taking off his glasses. Focus, he thought, you've got to focus. You can mourn all you want later on, but right now, you have a job to do, which is why you had to do that.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Spencer start to stir. Harry quickly stood and walked over to the older man, bending over him. "Are you all right?"

Spencer nodded. "Never saw that one coming, must be getting too damn old. Where is he?" Harry saw the sadness on the man's face as he looked over at the edge and saw Fromant's body.

"He grabbed her, she tried to get away, I was able to Stun him. But then, I had to..." He trailed off, unable to say it.

No doubt Spencer saw the pain on Harry's face. As he got up, he gave Harry's shoulder a firm squeeze. "I get it. Listen, Harry, you had to do it. He couldn't be left behind. Right now, any risk is too big a risk."

Harry nodded, but couldn't feel better about it. Seeing this as well, Spencer added, "I know it doesn't help, but it'll get better with time. You did it for the right reason, remember that. And I know that it doesn't matter that he deserved it, but he did. C'mon, let's get moving. We're still fighting the clock."

Harry nodded numbly and followed Spencer into the cave. After about ten meters it was dark enough that Spencer said "Lumos," and the end of his wand lit up, as did Harry's a second later. The ground under their feet was rocky and often uneven; Harry was careful to watch where he stepped.

Suddenly the light from the wands revealed a vertical translucent field that seemed to ripple. Harry had no idea what it was, but it seemed obvious that walking through it would have some effect, and that the effect wouldn't really be a good one.

He was going to ask Spencer what he thought it was when a snake slithered by. It was a few meters long; Harry didn't know what species it was. I should study snakes, he thought, since I'm a Parseltongue. Wait, am I? Did I only have that ability because Voldemort's Horcrux was in me, and now it's gone? Well, one way to find out. "Greetings," he said to the snake.

The snake turned its head and looked at Harry... suspiciously, Harry thought, but he couldn't be sure. The snake hissed. "Greetings, snake language speaker. Why do you encroach on our cave?"

At least I can still do it, Harry thought. "My friend and I have an important mission. We don't wish to disturb you and your friends. Do you know anything about this magical field?"

"Men were here, speaking of it. Said that for one to pass, one must die."

Harry had a sudden recollection of hearing of such a magical field before, but he wasn't sure where. The first person to touch the field would die, which would deactivate the field—Harry wasn't sure for how long—and allow the second person through.

A chill passed through him, as he realized that he would be the one to walk through. He knew that if he told Spencer what the field was, Spencer would likely insist on being the one to go. So, asking Spencer what he thought they should do was tantamount to asking him to go. He knew there was the argument that Spencer was much older, but he felt that shouldn't decide it. He didn't want to die, and was deeply saddened to have to leave his parents, but he knew that this was the right thing to do. He spoke again to the snake. "Thanks. We won't disturb you."

The snake didn't respond further, and went on its way. Harry made his right hand into a fist, activating the ring on his right ring finger so he could look for one last time at his family's home. He saw that Sirius, Ron, and Hermione were in the living room in addition to his parents; he realized that it had to be a get-together for his birthday. He was saddened that it would be turned into a tragedy for them.

Saying a silent goodbye—he had done it once before, just a month or so ago, but it didn't seem any easier now—he made a fist again to shut off the ring's functionality, so the image would no longer appear. But for some reason, it didn't work as it always had before. Was it something to do with the cave and how it affected magic, or the field in front of them? Or was fate just taunting him by insisting that he look at what he would be walking away from? He steeled himself; it had to be done. Doing anything else was cowardice.

"Well?"

"Hmmm?" Harry asked, startled out of his train of thought.

"What did it say?"

"Oh, the snake." Unsure of what to say, Harry improvised a lie. "He said it's no problem, that someone who speaks Parseltongue has to go through first. So, I'll just go ahead."

Spencer shrugged lightly and gestured for Harry to go ahead. Harry hesitated, then realized that long hesitation would cause Spencer to suspect he was lying. Well, this is it, he thought. He nodded to Spencer, and walked toward the field. When he was two meters away, Spencer suddenly spoke from behind him.

“Harry.”

Harry turned his head. “Yes?”

A sad smile had come to Spencer’s face. “You’re a good man.” Harry saw the Stunner come at him, but too late to do anything about it.

* * * * *

Lying on his back, Harry came to in time to see Spencer walking, only a step away from the field. He bolted upright. “Robert! No!”

He scrambled to his feet as Spencer stepped into the field. He saw Spencer’s body stiffen, then fall forward, face first. He ran forward as the field disappeared; it was now clearly safe to go through. Harry fought back tears as he bent over Spencer’s body, knowing it was useless, but needing to check just the same. He felt for a pulse; nothing.

He sat on the ground, his heart so heavy that it didn’t occur to him to be relieved that he was still alive. As he leaned over forward, he heard a crinkling sound come from his chest. A piece of paper, folded in two, had been stuffed into his robes. He took it out, opened it, and read.

Sorry, Harry, but you’re not a good liar. I suspected what the field was, and your reactions confirmed it. I don’t want to die any more than you do, but we both know it makes more sense for me to go. Not only because you’re young and I’m old, but also because I need to prove to myself that I can do the noble thing.

I know you'll do well, because you know how to do the right thing. I hope you'll remember me with compassion. You'll find the thing, and succeed. Good luck.

Starting to sob, Harry stopped himself, the last sentence reminding him that despite witnessing three deaths in the past few minutes, he still had a job to do. It only now occurred to him that his ring was still active, and the living room of Potter's Hollow was still visible to him; Sirius was talking to Ron and Hermione as James left the room. Again he tried to shut the ring off, and again he failed. He got up, and looked back at Spencer's body. "Goodbye, Robert," he said quietly. He said "Lumos," walked forward, and didn't look back.

The next ten minutes passed quickly as many thoughts went through Harry's head, most of them negative. Ten people went out on this mission, and now nine of them are dead. I have to succeed; if I don't, then they died for nothing. Leave it to Death Eaters to put up a trap that requires a human sacrifice to get past. Now it seems like it was a waste to send Hedghorn over that cliff; we could have used him for this, and Spencer would still be alive. But what were we going to do, bring him along in case we needed a human sacrifice? It's not the kind of thing you can know, and bringing him would have been a huge risk.

He came upon the first ten-foot drop; fortunately it was not a sheer drop, but just a very steep slope downward. He sat with his legs forward, slid down, and did a weak Hover Charm to soften his landing. Straightening up, he continued walking.

After five more minutes, the Lumos charm started to get weaker; the light flickered, and started to go out for short periods of time. Deciding it was too dangerous to walk for long with no light, Harry put away his wand and got out the flashlight. He turned it on and continued walking. To his surprise, the image of the Potter's Hollow living room remained strong in his mind. He wondered if there would be more magical traps, but he remembered that since magic was undependable this far into the cave, it was highly unlikely. He continued on, determined to reach his goal.

Lost in thought, he almost didn't notice the scene change in his family's home: Ron, Hermione, and Sirius were slack in their chairs, appearing to be unconscious. Harry tried to look more closely at the image; what had happened?

Horror filled him as he now saw two hooded figures, unmistakably Death Eaters, drag his parents into the living room from the kitchen. He watched as his friends and family were disarmed, tied up, and Enervated. Their faces showed their shock at the sudden turn of events. How in the world did they get in, Harry wondered. What do they want?

The question was soon answered as one of the Death Eaters waved his wand, and large block letters appeared in the air: POTTER TELEPORT OUT NOW.

Harry gasped; how did they know he had a ring that allowed him to see the living room? How did they know that he, out of all of the Aurors, had made it into the cave? He saw his parents exchange surprised looks; of course, he thought, they couldn't know what was going on. People were talking, but he could only get images, not audio.

He took a deep breath, and started to run as fast as he thought he could get away with in the uncertain terrain. He tried to keep the crushing despair away by concentrating on running. He knew what they wanted, and he knew what the threat was. As if to confirm his thought, a new message appeared in the air in the living room of Potter's Hollow: BLACK DIES IN 60 SECONDS COME OUT NOW WE WILL KNOW.

Harry continued running. He knew he was much too far away for it to do any good, but he had to do something. As he ran, he contemplated agreeing to their demands. But what good would it do? Even if he Apparated into the living room, he might not be able to take care of both of them. He could get the Aurors to mount a fast rescue mission. How? By explaining that he had abandoned his mission?

WE WILL DROP OUR WANDS IF YOU COME YOU CAN STOP US.

He saw both Death Eaters drop their wands onto the floor; one looked at his watch. Again, it was as if they'd read his mind.

He felt unbearable emotional pressure as he ran forward, looking at the ground to check the terrain. Was it possible that the Aurors' information about what was at the end of the cave was wrong, that all those people would not really die? Could he teleport away without truly endangering a hundred thousand wizards? No, his mind told him. It's so important that the Aurors sent ten people on what was nearly a suicide mission, which they wouldn't do if they weren't sure. There's no coming back here, that device could go off at any time...

Harry let out an anguished "NO!" as he saw a Death Eater pick up a wand, send a green bolt into Sirius's chest, and wave it at the air for a new message: WEASLEY AND GRANGER WILL DIE IN 60 SECONDS.

Harry didn't stop running; it was as if running could allow him to escape what was happening, even though he knew it couldn't. Memories of Sirius flashed through his mind, adding to the already excruciating pain pressing on his feelings. Ron and Hermione next, less than a minute away. And then...

A part of him, the rational part, knew the situation perfectly well. The thing to do was not to go back. None of them would want their lives to be bought with the lives of all of wizarding England, and all had at some point risked their lives for what they knew was right. But the knowledge did Harry no good. Watching them die while he did what he knew was right—

This thought was cut off as the two Death Eaters picked up their wands from the floor, and fired bolts into Hermione and Ron, who slumped over dead. POTTERS WILL DIE IN 60 SECONDS.

It was torture; he would have much preferred the Cruciatus Curse. He desperately thought of a way to do something without leaving the cave, but there was nothing, and he knew it. His parents, who had always been there to support him, cared for him, were proud of him, loved him... he felt his hand reach for the teleporter, almost

involuntarily. Painfully, he forced his hand away from it, for he knew that if he held it in his hand, he would use it. He ran forward, hoping against hope that somehow the device would appear right in front of him, he could deactivate it and teleport away, just in time... keep going... a part of him knew the chance was almost zero, but he had to keep going...

Suddenly seeing another 10-foot drop, he was running too fast to stop; he toppled over the side, falling five feet before hitting the top of a steep slope, from which he tumbled down to the rocky ground. Fueled by desperation, he struggled to his feet, ignoring whatever injuries he had sustained, limping forward, pointing the flashlight into the distance, hoping to see—

In the picture of his living room, the five Death Eaters picked up their wands, and two pointed them at his parents. The picture didn't—thankfully—allow Harry a close view of their faces, but they seemed calm, defiant. Starting to sob, he pushed away a last impulse to reach for the teleporter. A hundred thousand people, a hundred thousand people...

Green bolts flew. His parents were dead.

He felt numb, as though a part of him had died. A darkness descended over him, one he was sure would never lift. He stopped running and walked more normally, favoring the left leg, which had been injured when he fell. He also thought he had a sprained left ankle, but he didn't care, as long as he could still move. The grief numbed his pain. He went on, zombielike, to fulfill a mission that he no longer cared about.

Suddenly, it was almost right in front of him. A huge vat, about six feet deep and five feet in diameter, filled with a bubbling white liquid, steps leading to the top, from where one could close the giant lid. He could see a small tunnel, a foot wide, leading to another part of the cave, inaccessible to humans. Does it go somewhere that it can be spread wide, like a volcano? How did it work? He didn't care. If he could just have reached it minutes sooner, his family and friends might still be alive. He cursed himself for not having run right after Spencer had died, even though he could have no way of knowing

what would happen. It shouldn't have happened, his home had been safe... It didn't matter now. Nothing mattered.

He climbed the steps, released the lid, and pushed it down. He saw a few levers that would lock the lid in place; he moved over to lock the lid down in three different places. Mechanically, he climbed down the ladder, walked over to the valve, and leaning against the wall of the cave, switched it to the 'off' position. He slid to the ground, and the tears started. He started to slowly lose consciousness; he had just enough time to wonder if he was dying due to exposure to the white liquid, and decided he didn't care. He didn't fight as the darkness took him.

* * * * *

Harry slowly regained consciousness, experiencing disorientation similar to what he'd experienced after he'd been rescued from the goblins. It seemed a struggle to awaken, and he would slip into dreams that made even less sense than dreams usually made. Finally, he was able to open his eyes.

He was in what appeared to be a circular room, sparsely furnished, with no windows or artwork on the walls. On the other side of the room, directly opposite him, he saw a doorway shrouded in soft white light. Glancing to his right, he saw a raised, flat surface—it looked like a bed, but it wasn't soft, and there were no blankets—with a very peculiar-looking energy field surrounding it. It was a swirling mass of white, blue, and what looked like translucent energy, spinning at the rate of one revolution per second. Its brightest point was at the center; it reminded Harry of pictures he'd seen in the Muggle world of galaxies. Suddenly, he heard a voice on his other side. "Hello, Harry."

"Kingsley? What are you..." Despair hit Harry as he remembered what had happened... but had it really happened? He remembered what he had just done, but he also remembered other things... growing up at the Dursleys', never having met his parents, even though he had spent his life with them... it felt to Harry as though two sets of memories were in his mind; it was very disorienting. "I did it, but..." He closed his eyes as he pain washed over him again.

“Harry, this is very important,” said Kingsley gravely. “What just happened felt real, but it wasn’t. You were inside that field. It’s a magical field that creates a scenario, like an alternate life. What happened in there... didn’t really happen. You were kidnapped by goblins, but anything you remember after that didn’t happen. I think your memories may be out of whack right now, but they should get better. You need to focus on the life you had before that. You live at Grimmauld Place, alone. You just found out Dudley is a wizard. You were made a member of the Wizengamot. What’s the shape of the Portkey that you have to my office?”

“Professor Dumbledore,” he answered without thinking. “Yes, I can remember some of that. It feels very strange, though. Like I have to think hard about which memory is the real one and which isn’t. You’re saying... I never met my parents?”

Kingsley shook his head. “I’m sorry, but, no.”

Harry exhaled; the pain seemed no less real. At least now he knew who to blame for it. “Those goblin bastards,” he muttered angrily. “They knew just how to screw me, how to hurt me the worst. I thought it couldn’t get any worse than not letting me sleep, but I was wrong.” Emotion came back to him; he closed his eyes and took another deep breath to fight off potential tears.

“Uh, yes,” said Kingsley uncomfortably. “Harry, there are a few things I need to explain.”

Harry slowly sat up on the bed he was in, and swung his feet over the edge. He tested his left ankle; it felt fine. He looked at Kingsley expectantly.

“First of all, that device is very old, and very powerful. We don’t know where it came from, or who made it. It seems to have the ability to tap into... the sum of all human knowledge, including people’s memories. The interactions you had with people in there... they might have told you something, something that only the true person knows, and it would almost certainly be correct, in the real world. Same thing with personalities. If you met someone in there who you’d never met in real life, like your parents... their personalities, even their memories,

would be accurately reflected. If they told you something that happened before they died, it was probably true. If they told you something that happened after they died, it was probably a very reasonable trajectory, an excellent guess of how their life would have gone. Again, it's not known how the device does it."

Kingsley looked like he was going to continue, but Harry cut in with a question. "Is there an Auror named Robert Spencer?"

Kingsley's eyebrows went up. "Yes."

"Is he alive?" A nod. "One of the ones who stayed behind?"

Again, Kingsley nodded. "I guess you talked to him."

"Yes. I... just saw him die."

"Well, he's actually alive. Harry... there's a position that you may never have heard of, called Auror Leader. There hasn't been one in several generations now—"

"You mean, Head of the Auror Office?"

"No, this is different. The title is 'Auror Leader.' It's very powerful, an extremely important position. The Head of the Auror Office supervises the Aurors, but within the law, and within certain parameters. The Auror Leader has absolute, unchallenged control over the Aurors and all matters related to security, and very substantial influence in society overall. He answers to no one, including the Ministry, or even the Minister. He can make rules for the Aurors, hire and fire at will. He is utterly respected, because people know that he will always do what is best for society."

Harry was surprised; he hadn't known about this. "And I met the Auror Leader when I was in that thing?"

Kingsley shook his head; he had never looked more solemn. "No, Harry. You are, now, Auror Leader."

Harry did a double-take. "I'm what?"

"I took the test for Auror Leader, about ten years ago. I failed; most people do. It takes a very special person to be Auror Leader, to be given that much trust by society. It has to be someone who will do anything necessary to save our society, if it comes to that. To pass the test, you need to be able to do four things, any one of which if you fail, you fail the test. You need to demonstrate great Auror-related skill in an area which is your strong point. You need to summon the will to end a life, if necessary, even though you would rather do anything but that. You have to be willing to give your own life rather than ask another to do it. And..." Kingsley's expression was even more solemn. "Because he's entrusted with so much power, the Auror Leader must be someone who... would even give up his family, his loved ones, to save our society."

Shock came over Harry; his mouth opened involuntarily. "You??" he gasped. "You did that to me?"

Kingsley nodded as Harry felt fury rising up inside him. "I gave you the test, yes. I'm sorry, Harry, but it was necessary—"

"NO, IT WASN'T!" Harry screamed. "You don't get to make that decision for me! I'll decide what goddamn tests I'll take and won't take! How could you..." Breathing heavily, he stopped talking, as the emotion from his parents' deaths still help powerful sway over him. It hadn't happened, but in a very important way, it had. He had met his parents, talked to them, loved them. And now they were gone, taken from him again... by design... Harry felt a cold fury toward Kingsley. "I'm not going to be the Auror Leader. You can go fuck yourself."

Kingsley didn't flinch at Harry's uncharacteristic language. "You are Auror Leader, whether you like it or not. It's done."

"Well, I'm not going to lead the Aurors, so it doesn't do a fuck of a lot of good, does it?" spat Harry.

"Harry, we need you. I didn't do this lightly. We have Aurors we can't trust, that only an Auror Leader can fire. I know you've already done far more than your share. But you wouldn't have passed the test if—"

Harry had heard enough; he was so angry at Kingsley that he was sorely tempted to beat him up physically, as a Muggle would. Not that he could—Kingsley was taller and heavier—but he wanted to. He had no curiosity about the doorway on the other side of the room; he just wanted to get out. He walked toward the door, then realized he could just Disapparate. He patted his robes to find his wand.

“We weren’t able to recover your wand. I need to tell you that the test puts a Forgetfulness Spell on you, makes it so you can’t tell anyone who doesn’t already know about this device and what it does.”

Without a word, Harry walked through the door, closing it hard behind him. He walked down a hall, saw a room on his left with a fireplace, and a box of Floo Powder on a shelf above the fireplace. He threw in a handful, said, “Twelve Grimmauld Place,” and walked through.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 13, Anywhere But Home: Grief-stricken and furious at Kingsley’s betrayal, Harry decides he needs to get as far away from England as possible. Putting his destination in the hands of fate, he finds himself in a country whose customs he finds strange and unfathomable... and before long, he finds himself in custody.

From Chapter 13: “Just tell me one thing,” Ron interrupted heatedly. “Tell me that it was really the goblins who kidnapped him, that it wasn’t you, doing it so you could put him through this test, and blaming it on the goblins.”

There was silence; Kingsley’s eyes narrowed, as if Ron was reaching the limit of what Kingsley would tolerate.

Chapter 13

Anywhere But Home

The first thing he saw as he walked out of the fireplace was a half-empty glass of water on the coffee table. Someone's been living here, I see, he thought. Realizing he wanted no one coming through, he pointed his wand at the fireplace. "Deny admittance for... one hour," he said, deciding that would be long enough. Then he cast a spell on the house, disallowing entrance by Apparition.

He walked upstairs to his room, opened the top drawer near his bed, and pulled out the Elder Wand. Now, he had no choice. He found his bottomless bag, went over to the artifact box, and poured them all into it. He could sort them out later.

He walked downstairs, heading over to the mail desk, but after one step, heard steps coming down the stairs behind him. "Who's..." Dudley gave a start. "Harry! You're back!" he grinned. "When did this happen?"

Harry was in no mood to explain anything; he just wanted to get as far away from everything as possible. "Dudley, would you please leave," he asked, expressionlessly. "I need to be alone for a while."

"What do you mean, you need to be alone?" Dudley demanded, his grin fading. "Everyone's been worried about you, they're going to want to know what happened, you can't just—"

"Dudley, I said—" Harry cut himself off as, looking at the mail desk, he saw that the letter he'd started to Luna was in a different direction than he'd left it. He pointed at it. "Did you read that?"

"Read what?" asked Dudley defensively. It suddenly occurred to Harry, without a doubt, that Dudley was lying; he knew exactly what Harry meant, but was trying to buy time to think of an answer. Harry wasn't sure how he knew, but he was sure he was right.

"You know what! That letter. Did you read that letter?"

“No, I didn’t! You know, you—“

Again, Harry recognized a lie. “Yes, you did! Did you tell anyone what it said?”

Dudley was flustered. “No! I mean, I—“

Yet another lie. “Who?” Harry demanded, anger at Kingsley coming out at Dudley.

“I didn’t tell him, but... Ron saw it too. We talked about it,” Dudley admitted, embarrassed.

Great, thought Harry. At the same time, he found it hard to care. Nothing mattered. “Dudley, I need you to leave.”

“Listen, Harry, what’s going on? I mean, you come back, and—“

Harry fought to remain calm. “Dudley, I swear to God, I’ll Stun you if you don’t leave here in the next ten seconds.”

“What the hell kind of attitude is that? We’ve been—“

Dudley collapsed under Harry’s Stunner, which to Harry’s surprise he could see despite having tried to use a low-intensity Stunner. I didn’t exactly give him ten seconds, Harry thought, but he clearly wasn’t going anywhere. But how the hell did I know he was lying? It was like a sense I didn’t know I had until now.

He sat down at the desk, and saw Dumbledore’s portrait in the frame. “Hello, Albus.”

“Good afternoon, Harry. I am most pleased to see you back, though saddened at the obvious distress you are in. Is there anything I can do to help?”

Harry shook his head. “Thanks, but there’s nothing you can do.”

“I gather the goblins were rather rough with you.”

"They were, but it wasn't what the goblins did. It was what Kingsley did, but it's something I can't talk about."

Dumbledore nodded sadly. "Auror Leader."

Harry's eyebrows went high. "You know about it?"

"I know the test; I took it. I guessed that you had been given it. Judging by your emotional state, I would guess that you passed."

"Yes." The pain hit him again; he felt ashamed, as if he had made the wrong choice, as if it meant he cared nothing for his family and friends.

Dumbledore nodded sympathetically. "I am sorry, Harry. I myself failed. I, like most people who take it, supposed it to be primarily a test of magical skill and daring. When the time came, I found that I could not sacrifice... what I had for so long desired, and finally had."

Harry grunted. "I wish I had done what you did. I am not going to be Auror Leader. I'm getting away from here, far away. I'm sorry, Albus, but would you mind if I focused on doing a few things I need to do before I leave?" His tone was businesslike, not friendly and respectful as it usually was with Dumbledore.

Dumbledore seemed not to take offense. "Of course, Harry."

Harry looked around the desk, picked up the letter-in-progress to Luna, and looked it over again. It seemed like he had written the first part a very long time ago, another life ago. He picked up a pen, and added a section.

It's a long while later; I just got back to my home, after being kidnapped. That was bad, but something happened after they rescued me that was worse, that I'm not allowed to talk about. (Forgetfulness Charm; please don't repeat any of this to anyone.) I'm leaving, and I don't know when I'll be back. I don't think I'll be able to keep in touch, but I wanted to thank you for all your help. I wish I could talk to you more, but I really need to get away from here.

He folded the letter, put it in an envelope and wrote her name on it, reached over to put it where he usually put letters to be sent... and realized that Kreacher would not conveniently be along to deliver it, or get it delivered. Annoyed, he looked up at Dumbledore. "Albus, would you... ask Hermione to make sure this gets delivered?"

"Of course."

"Thanks." He went up to Sirius's bedroom and thought more about what he wanted to pack; he took a few sets of clothes, but except for the artifacts, he couldn't think of anything else. Oh, yeah, gold. He went downstairs, opened the safe, and taking from his canister as opposed to those of the bank, withdrew what he guessed to be a thousand Galleons. That should do me for quite a while, he thought. Anything else I need? Oh, yeah, the Firebolt. Never know when that'll come in handy. He Summoned it from his bedroom, put it into the bag, and looked around. He saw a copy of the Prophet on a chair near the sofa. Don't care, he thought. He had no interest at all in what was going on in wizarding England, and was similarly uninterested in the several dozen letters awaiting him at his desk.

He walked over to Dumbledore's portrait. "I'm leaving, Albus. I don't know when or if I'll be back. All I know is I need to be far, far away, someplace where nobody knows who the hell I am. I'd appreciate it if nobody tried to find me, or get in contact with me."

"Of course, Harry," said Dumbledore gravely. "My affection and best wishes go with you."

"Thanks," said Harry. He threw on his Invisibility Cloak and Disapparated.

* * * * *

An hour later, Hermione, Fleur, Dudley, and all Weasleys except Ginny assembled at Grimmauld Place, in the living room. Kingsley came through the fireplace, and four people started talking at once. "Kingsley, where have you been?" demanded Arthur. "You've been gone from the Ministry for over a day, nobody knew where you were. It was rumored you'd rescued Harry, but nobody who knew anything

was saying anything. Now what is going on? Where is he, and why did he attack Dudley?"

"And, was it really even him?" put in Ron. "That really doesn't sound like him."

Kingsley sighed; this wasn't going to be fun, and there was too much he couldn't tell them. "It was him. We rescued him about thirty hours ago. He had been subjected to torture, and later, sleep deprivation." Ron and Hermione exchanged expressions of sadness and concern. "When we got to him, he was very disoriented, which is what sleep deprivation does. That was when he called Kreacher; we suspect he thought of it before, but didn't do it. When he did it... Kreacher was obliterated by a trap involving projectile weapons. We came through the portal less than a minute after he died. He'd been reduced to goop, which was all over the place, and all over Harry."

"Oh, my God," murmured Hermione, a tear rolling down her cheek. Ron put an arm around her.

"We encountered no resistance; we think they had no idea that we could do what we did," Kingsley continued. "We discovered, to our surprise, that he wasn't in Gringotts after all, but in an isolated building not in any of the usual wizard or goblin areas. We got him back to an Auror hideaway.

"And... I'm sorry, but this is where I have to stop. Something happened after that, something that's so top-security that I can't tell you even though I trust you all. I'll say only this: it was something we asked of him, without his consent. It was extremely difficult, and was, as it happened, emotionally devastating for him. That's all I can tell you."

"My ass!" said Ron loudly and angrily. "You're going to have to do better than that! This is Harry you're talking about! You're going to tell us what happened!"

"I'm sorry, Ron, but I'm not." Kingsley's tone was flat, and final.

“I’m sorry, Kingsley, but you are,” came a voice that everyone present had forgotten about: Dumbledore’s. “They deserve to know. You can put them under Forgetfulness Charms. But if you do not tell them, I will... without Forgetfulness Charms.”

“You’re bluffing. Harry’s under the Charm as well, he couldn’t have told you.”

“Unless I knew already, which I do. I took the test as well, long ago.”

“I could blast your picture off the wall,” said Kingsley coolly.

“Kingsley!” gasped Molly. “This is Professor Dumbledore you’re talking about!”

“You could not reach my other portraits,” responded Dumbledore evenly, “Not in time, anyway, before I had spread word of what happened far and wide. A portrait, you see, is no longer under the influence of a Forgetfulness Charm. I suggest that you do not try me.”

Kingsley stared at the portrait, clearly considering whether to challenge Dumbledore, who spoke again, more softly. “I know there are good security reasons not to divulge the details of how it works. But are you sure you have no other motive for not wishing to tell them?”

“What do you mean?”

“You made a mistake—“

“It wasn’t a mistake—“

“So, you do not think that giving an extremely emotionally stressful test to a seventeen-year-old—a test that 99% of those who take it, including you and me, fail—who has been through what he has been through was not a mistake? The results speak for themselves, Kingsley. Part of maturity is admitting when you are wrong.”

“There are things you don’t know,” countered Kingsley, “that justify taking the chance. And those of us who know can’t go around telling people.”

“You will tell them. I was serious about my threat.”

Kingsley regarded Dumbledore for another minute, much as one would size up a potential adversary before a fight. Dumbledore stared back, then added, “Forgetfulness Charms are good enough, Kingsley. You know that. And even if they were not, these people can be trusted. Further, no one else can take the test during Harry’s lifetime, meaning that no one here—“

“All right, all right,” interrupted Kingsley impatiently. He took a deep breath, and addressed his impatient audience. “First... is there anyone here... well, Dudley won’t know, but is there anyone else here who doesn’t know about the concept of ‘Auror Leader?’” He waved his wand as he spoke, casting the spell that would cause the person to forget what he or she was going to say if they tried to tell another person who didn’t already know the secret.

Half of those watching raised their hands; Molly and Arthur exchanged shocked looks. “It’s not taught at Hogwarts, but I’ve read about in outside history books,” said an astonished Hermione. “It said there have only been fifteen in the last thousand and two hundred years.”

Kingsley briefly explained the authority of the Auror Leader. “There is an ancient device that the Aurors have control over. It’s a little like the veil in the Department of Mysteries; no one knows who built it or how it works. A person lies on the surface in the center of the device. He or she has to be tired and disoriented for the process to work, which is exactly how we found Harry.

“The device adjusts the person’s memory, causing him to wake up thinking that his world is a certain way, and that that’s the way it’s always been. They wake up, they think life is as usual, but in reality, they’re still in that device.”

“Virtual reality,” supplied Dudley. At the others’ quizzical looks, he added, “That’s what Muggles call it.”

“Yes, that’s exactly right,” agreed Kingsley, recalling the phrase from his experience in the Muggle world. “There are certain parameters, and the device adjusts the person’s memory to fit those parameters. In Harry’s case, his ‘reality’ was that his parents never died, nor did Sirius.

“For most details of this alternate life... this is what the device does that makes it truly remarkable, and why we want it kept a secret. It somehow reaches into... all possible human knowledge, and creates a thoroughly believable reality based on the given parameters. When I took the test, people in my reality told me things, private things, that they had never told anyone. After the test, I was able to confirm those things, and two people were utterly shocked that I knew something that I couldn’t possibly have known. The reality that I inhabited was, arguably, what would have happened if things had gone a different way.

“I don’t know many of the details of Harry’s reality when he was there. But he spent what was, for him, over a week in this reality, though in real time it was about a day. I only know that he lived in his parents’ home. He was also told that he was an Auror. In this reality, he had been made an Auror at the end of his sixth year at Hogwarts.”

“But how did he remember the year he spent with us, tracking down Voldemort?” asked Hermione.

“As with everything else that’s inconsistent with his real memories, the device and his unconscious mind combined to create a new memory of events that was consistent with the new information he’d been given. He probably remembered what he did with you; he just remembered it differently.

“The device creates a scenario. It’s basically the same for everyone who takes the test, though the details may be different based on what makes the most sense for the subject’s reality. The scenario is a dire threat to wizarding society, one that if not averted will cause the death of every wizard in England. There are four tests, four parts of the

scenario that if not successfully navigated will result in failure. The person must pass all four.

“The first is a very difficult situation involving the person’s Auror-related skills; in Harry’s case, his skill on a broom. Over fifty percent of subjects fail this portion, and all are very skilled. The reason is that the Auror leader has to be able to be respected for some exceptional skill, and demonstrate that skill. Harry’s version was a little similar to the Horntail, but much harder.

“The second is a hostage situation; it ends up with the necessity of killing the hostage-taker... in cold blood. The test here is that you have to be able to do something morally wrong on the face of it, for a greater purpose, to save thousands of lives. But it has to hurt. Some people wash out of the test at this point because they kill the person without remorse, without sadness. The device knows; if it causes you no pain, you fail the test.

“The third is that you’re with another Auror, and you find an obstacle that to get past, you or the other Auror must sacrifice yourself. The test is to just do it, give yourself up. If you tell the other Auror what the situation is, discuss who should be the one to die, you fail. To pass, you must give up your life to save his, without telling him. This ensures that the Auror Leader will be respected by Aurors, because they know that he would give his life for theirs. They would die for him, because he would for them. I knew Harry would pass this, of course, because he’s done it before. Still, it’s part of the test.” Most of the Weasleys looked stricken, knowing what Harry had already been through.

“The last one... is the hardest, and where I failed,” went on Kingsley, years-old pain unconsciously creeping into his voice and expression. “The scenario sets up a situation in which the subject’s loved ones are threatened by the bad guys. He can save them, but only by abandoning his mission. In the end, his choice is: leave the mission, save his loved ones, but know that it’ll result in thousands of deaths. Or... finish the mission, save society... and watch friends and family killed, one by one. The scenario ends when you’ve accomplished your mission... by which time, everyone you love is dead, whom you

could have saved. In Harry's case, the people were his parents, Sirius, and Ron and Hermione."

Hermione started to sob. "Are you out of your mind?" shouted an outraged Ron. "How could you do this to him? After what he's been through, what his life has been like? I thought you cared about him—"

"I do!" shouted Kingsley, glaring at Ron. "I know what he went through! You think I'm happy about it? You don't think I wanted to let him rest and relax? I said he'd earned it, and I meant it—"

"But you were just waiting for the right moment to throw him into this meat grinder—"

"We need him! Society needs him, and the Aurors need him! I did it because his being Auror Leader will probably save lives. The reason is internal matters that I definitely can't tell you, and Dumbledore can't either because he doesn't know. Harry could, but he's gone. But I told him about the problems before he was kidnapped. He knows why I did it."

"And he doesn't blame you?" asked Fleur incredulously.

"Are you kidding? Of course he blames me. He hates my guts right now. And I don't blame him. But I did it for important reasons—"

"Just tell me one thing," Ron interrupted heatedly. "Tell me that it was really the goblins who kidnapped him, that it wasn't you, doing it so you could put him through this test, and blaming it on the goblins."

There was silence; Kingsley's eyes narrowed, as if Ron was reaching the limit of what Kingsley would tolerate. "What?" Ron persisted defiantly. "You would put him through this horrible test, the worst trauma of his life—which is really saying something, in his case—make him think everyone he loved died because of him, but oh no, you wouldn't kidnap him to do that, because it would be wrong? Why, how could I possibly think you would do such a thing?"

Kingsley's eyes remained on Ron. "He has a point," said Fleur. "If you would do the one, why would you not do the other?"

After another short silence, Kingsley said to Ron, "If I told you, would you believe me?"

Ron paused, thinking it over. Finally, he answered. "Yes, I will."

"Why?"

"Because you passed the third test, before failing the fourth one."

Kingsley nodded. "I appreciate your remembering that. The answer is no, I didn't. I would have asked him to take the test. But I'll also ask you to believe that if the result could have been achieved by my going through that instead of him, I would have done it. But you only get to take the test once. I care about Harry, I do. But if there's one thing I learned from failing the fourth test, it's that you have to do what's best for society, not just one person."

"But why is such a harsh test necessary?" asked Fleur.

"Because," explained Kingsley, "the Auror Leader has extremely broad power, and not only as an Auror. He is, literally, above the law. He is trusted to do what's best for society. He could kill someone and not be punished for it, even if there appeared to be no good reason. The price for having that kind of power is demonstrating, in such a difficult way, that you're worthy of it, and can be trusted with it."

"But Harry never wanted power, or anything like that," protested Hermione.

Kingsley nodded sadly. "I know. But power is sometimes given to those who don't want it, and maybe it's better that way. The great... irony, or tragedy, of Harry's life is that he's such an exceptional person that he'll always be asked to serve, needed by society. And he'll do it, because it's his nature to do it. He proved that by passing the fourth test. He is the Auror Leader now. I do believe he'll be back."

"Do you know where he is?" asked Molly. "Albus, did he say anything about that?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "I believe he himself did not know. But I know that he wished for no one to follow him, or find him. He needs to be away from everything familiar, to sort things out. Having been through this test, I find his desire... utterly understandable. We should respect his wishes. He will be all right."

Kingsley answered the first question anyway. "After he left the area with the device, I had the magic observers focus on Muggle areas, figuring he'd want to go where he wouldn't be recognized. At 3:44 p.m., there was an Apparition in the backyard of 4 Privet Drive."

Dudley's eyebrows went high. "Why would he go there?"

"I think he just went there to get his bearings, decide what to do next," answered Kingsley. "One minute after that, someone—it had to be him, of course—Apparated to a location in that neighborhood called the Bookword."

"The Bookworm," Dudley corrected him. "It's the nearest bookstore in the area. But why..."

"Five minutes later, there was another Apparition, at Heathrow Airport. Not inside; the outskirts."

Understanding dawned on Dudley. "A map."

"Almost certainly," agreed Kingsley. "An Auror was dispatched to the airport, and observed him from a distance. He was using his Cloak, but the Auror could see parts of his broom. He got on it, flew next to a plane, near the windows, landed... then Apparated onto the plane. A few minutes later, it took off."

"Where was it headed?" asked Molly.

"We don't know," said Kingsley. "All we know is that it was British Airways. But what's most interesting is that—"

"He didn't know," exclaimed Dudley.

“That’s right,” said Kingsley. “He just picked a plane at random—one, I guess, that had extra seats. His actions point to the notion that he just wanted to get as far away as possible, it didn’t matter where.”

George spoke for the first time. “Well, good job.”

Clearly trying to control himself, Kingsley answered, “I understand your feelings, and I wasn’t looking forward to telling you this. But I have to think about what’s best for everyone. I took a chance, and it blew up in my face. But when you’re responsible for many lives, like I am... and when you’ve made a decision to give up your life so another person doesn’t have to... you feel a certain entitlement to ask something of another person. Even something as huge as this.”

“Yes, but you didn’t ask him, you—“

“Ron,” interrupted his father. “We know how you feel. But enough’s enough. Kingsley’s explained himself adequately. You don’t have to agree with his decision, but there’s no point in haranguing him further. It’s done.”

Ron glared at his father, then angrily walked over to the other side of the room, sitting in the chair furthest from the wall with Dumbledore’s portrait. Hermione’s eyes followed him with concern, but she stayed where she was.

“So... what do we tell people, when they want to know where Harry is?” asked Bill.

“If I may,” said Dumbledore, “It may be best that no one knows for now that he was given the test, or that he passed it. Not quite knowing the dire nature of the test, people may feel that he has abandoned a responsibility. It may be better to simply say that he was rescued, has recovered, and has now decided that after all his troubles, he needs a change of scenery, and so has decided to embark on a long journey overseas. This would be very believable, as some wizards his age do this very thing; it also has the virtue of, while not being the whole truth, not being a lie.”

Kingsley slowly nodded. "That makes sense. Does anyone here have any objections to this being the official story?" No one spoke. "I ask because you have to put out the same story in private. We know how fast gossip spreads. If someone asks you what happened to Harry, and you refuse to say anything, or hint that what they read in the Prophet wasn't the whole story, it'll fuel rumors. You can say something like, 'he wasn't doing well' or 'he had a tough time,' because it's consistent with his kidnapping." Again, there was no comment.

"All right. Does anyone have any other questions about this before I leave?"

"What was his reaction," asked Hermione, "when you told him he was Auror Leader?"

"He didn't understand it until I explained that I was responsible for what happened to him. He couldn't believe it at first, then he was furious, used a certain four-letter word a few times, said he had no intention of being Auror Leader, then left."

She looked at Ron in surprise. "Have you ever heard him use that word?"

Ron shook his head. "No. But I'm not surprised." She understood from his expression that he'd had the urge to use it with Kingsley himself.

"It is, indeed, not an unexpected response to such news," put in Dumbledore. "What is more indicative of his state of mind was his treatment of Dudley, which I witnessed. He was simply not ready to deal with anyone, after the trauma and loss he had suffered. He needs time to process it. Which I assume, Kingsley, is why you did not insist that he stay."

Kingsley nodded. "In other circumstances, I would have. But almost anyone would have reacted the way he did."

“But he didn’t really suffer a loss, did he?” wondered Dudley. “Now that he knows his parents were never alive, shouldn’t he get over it more quickly than if they had really died?”

“It does not work that way, Dudley,” explained Dumbledore. “First of all, as they say, a bell once rung cannot be un-rung. It was real for him, so the emotional experience was extremely real. Secondly, it must be viewed in the context of his whole life. You know, better than anyone here, what his childhood was like. He never had parents who loved him.”

“And now,” Hermione continued, “he’s sitting on a plane, not only feeling horrible about what happened, but thinking that he finally had a nice family life, he got to know what it was like, only to have it torn away from him.”

“That poor boy,” said Molly sadly. “He needs help.”

“Mum, he wouldn’t take it, no matter where it came from,” said Ron from across the room. “He just needs to be alone. I think he’ll be all right.”

“Indeed, as I have said, Harry is quite resilient,” said Dumbledore. “But this will take some time. We should have no expectations that Harry will be back any time soon. An absence of even a year would not be out of the question.”

“Kingsley,” asked Dudley, “did what happened to him, like, change him in any way? I mean, except for the emotional stuff you said. Does that machine do anything to you?”

“Well, it’s a device, not a machine, but yes,” said Kingsley, regarding Dudley with interest. “Did you notice something?”

“No,” said Dudley unconvincingly. “Just wondering.”

Kingsley gave Dudley an extra second’s stare before continuing. “Yes, I hadn’t gotten around to mentioning this, but the old scrolls that talk about the Auror Leader say that ‘he will be more than he was.’ This is vague, but many feel that it means that the device confers

enhancements of power or abilities, or extra abilities. It would make sense; extra abilities would be a reasonable thing to give someone who's proven that he merits them, and would use them wisely."

There were no further questions, and Kingsley soon left.

* * * * *

"Would you like something to drink, sir?"

Harry looked up and saw a young, pretty Asian woman looking down at him solicitously. "Umm..." He was going to say no, but something to drink sounded good; also, he realized he was hungry. "What do you have?"

"Oh, almost everything, sir. Beer, wine, cocktails, juice, soft drinks, coffee..."

"Soft drink, then. Uh, Coke, I guess."

"Certainly, sir." She gave him the can, and a glass with several ice cubes. "Would you like a snack? Nuts, or crackers?"

"Can I have both?"

She smiled as she put both on his tray. "Of course, sir. Meal service will begin in thirty minutes, but you can choose to eat at any time."

I thought you had to eat when they brought it, he thought. Oh yeah, this is first class, I forgot. "As soon as possible, please."

"Certainly, sir. I'll be by with a menu in a few minutes." With another smile, she moved on to the next seat.

He tilted the seat back and tried to relax. He'd almost forgotten that the Apparition sound might be heard when he came on board, but no one seemed to notice, since the plane's engine made quite a bit of noise anyway. He'd been able to approach the empty seat under the Cloak, and cast a spell to make sure no one looked at him as he took it off; a mild Confundus Curse had been enough to convince the flight

attendants that he had boarded the plane along with everyone else. Just to be on the safe side, he had done the curse on the two people sitting nearest to him.

The flight attendant reminded him of Cho; not just because she was Asian, but there was some resemblance. Thinking of Cho reminded him of the alternate reality he'd experienced so very recently. Not that it ever left his mind—the grief was still crushing—but this was a detail he hadn't thought of since he'd returned to this, the 'real' reality... but he wished he could have the old one back, or at least, before the last bit...

So, he wondered, why was Cho my girlfriend? Or, more properly, why wasn't Ginny my girlfriend? Kingsley said the thing would do what might really happen. But Cho isn't exactly my true love; I'd barely thought about her for two years, and that date I had with her in that reality wasn't great. Well, the talking wasn't, anyway. We didn't seem to click. Did the device that made that reality know that I felt weird about Ginny, and give me the only other option? Good thing it wasn't Hermione, then I would've felt guilty about Ron... funny how Mum hoped I'd be with Hermione...

He winced as he realized both that she was dead, and that it hadn't really been Lily Potter. But he knew that in a way, it had been. That would have more or less been his reality if his parents hadn't died. He felt another terrible pang of grief, both for the fact that he would never see them again, and for the fact that he'd been denied such a chance in the 'real' reality. Not having his parents had always felt bad, but now that he'd experienced exactly what he could have had, it felt that much worse.

He tried to banish such thoughts, but they wouldn't go away. His parents had died, and the fact that they hadn't technically been alive didn't make a bit of difference. He'd had breakfast with them less than a day ago, his mother had kissed him on the cheek... Stop it, dammit. He fought back tears as he tried to think of something else. He tried picking up one of the Muggle magazines at his seat, but in less than a few minutes his mind was away from the magazine.

Auror Leader... why have I never heard of that? Hermione probably has... Kingsley said the position has all kinds of power, but what job makes you watch your family die before you can have it? I mean, that's pretty twisted and cruel. I'm not sure I want a job that that's a requirement of, no matter what about it might be good.

He tried to remember details of the experience; he could remember everything that happened, but he had trouble recalling details of that life that he had remembered while there, but hadn't actually lived through. Kingsley had asked him to be an Auror at the end of sixth year, but he couldn't remember anything more about it. He decided that the device must create false memories as needed, but not until then.

His stomach gurgled, and he suddenly realized that he hadn't even started on the snacks he'd been given. He opened the pack of mixed nuts and started munching, his thoughts drifting. Sometimes he saw his parents in his mind's eye, sometimes the cave from which he'd sealed their fate. He would realize he was thinking about the cave, try to think of something else, but kept coming back to the cave. He told himself that if he had it to do over again, he'd save his family. He recalled his father's appealing self-deprecating humor, which offset his ego; his obvious pride in his son; his efforts to be a better person despite his own limitations. He recalled his mother's pride in him, more quiet but no less strong than her husband's; her kind and gentle manner, her clearly expressed love. It added to the pain, to think that he could have had that all those years, but fate and Voldemort had consigned him to the hell that was the Dursleys' home. Feeling tears coming again, he turned his head to face the window, and looked out onto the clouds that covered most of England, which he was not sorry to be leaving.

* * * * *

Most of the flight was uneventful. He had a meal—not up to what Hogwarts served, but adequate by most Muggle standards—and gave in to the desire to have a few alcoholic drinks. He told himself it was just for a change, but he knew it was in the hope that it could drown out the thoughts and memories that plagued him. It didn't seem to work, except in that it encouraged his tiredness. Assisted by

the ability of the seat to recline to an almost flat position, he dozed off soon after the main cabin lights went off.

The next thing he knew, he was being gently nudged. “Sir?”

He blinked a few times, and looked up to see that the cabin lights were back on, and a kind-faced, middle-aged flight attendant was standing over him. “I’m sorry, sir,” she said, “but we’ll be landing in about an hour, and I would have had to wake you up soon anyway. I wanted to let you know that this is the last chance to have a meal before we land.”

Harry started to adjust the seat to a normal sitting position. “How long have I been asleep?”

“About six hours, sir.”

Wow, I’m a pretty good sleeper, he thought. Of course, the alcohol didn’t hurt. “Okay, thanks. Do you have a—” He cut himself off as she handed him a menu. His eyebrows went up. “Breakfast?”

“We’re traveling east, and we passed through night,” she explained. “You slept through most of it. We’ll be landing at about 10:00 a.m. local time.”

“Oh. Okay, I’ll have the... vegetable omelet, sausage, and scone. With orange juice. But could you bring some coffee first, please?”

“Of course, sir. I’ll be just a moment.”

She left, and he found himself surprised at the high level of service on Muggle airplanes before he again recalled that this was first class, and Muggles paid extraordinary sums of money for such treatment. It briefly occurred to him that perhaps he should feel guilty for accepting such services under false pretenses—taking something, even service, without paying for it was tantamount to stealing—but he’d been through so much that he barely gave it a second thought. The last thing he was going to worry about was the ethical implications of taking a seat no one was using anyway.

The coffee arrived in less than a minute, and he drank it quickly, starting to feel more awake. The food came ten minutes later. As he ate, he heard a voice over the speakers. "This is your captain speaking. We'll soon be starting our descent, and we'll be landing at Narita Airport at approximately 10:15 local time, about forty minutes from now. The weather in Tokyo is currently clear and fifteen degrees centigrade, with a high of twenty-three expected later today. We'll be asking all passengers in about ten minutes to remain seated with seat belts fastened. Thank you."

It only then occurred to him that he hadn't thought about where the plane was headed; it was as if for him there were only two places, England and not-England, and he was headed for not-England. What do I even know about Japan, he wondered. Not much. There used to be samurai a long time ago, they lost a war against America, and now they mainly manufactured advanced electronic goods; these were the basic facts he had gleaned from what Muggle television he had watched as a child. He supposed he would learn much more in very short order.

As he finished his food, he wondered what he would do when he landed, something which he also hadn't thought about. Live in the Muggle world, or look for the magical world? How about money? English Galleons might not be good here. Well, I'll worry about that when it comes to that.

As the plane started to descend, he cast a spell on himself that caused anyone who looked in his direction to quickly look somewhere else, as if there must be another more interesting thing to look at. He opened his bottomless bag and took out his Firebolt and his Invisibility Cloak, as well as the translation artifact. Albus was right, he thought, this did come in handy. He put it around his neck, then took out the white wrapping sheet. He put the bag in it, reduced its size, and embedded it into his fingernail as he'd done before. As the light appeared as it had before, he wrapped the Firebolt in the Cloak, leaned it against the wall next to his seat, then thought better of it and held it across his lap as he fastened his seat belt. Don't want to put it somewhere and then forget where it is, he thought. I could always Summon it, of course, but better to be careful.

He looked out the window and saw ocean below, but no clouds, and wondered how high he could fly before air pressure became an issue. He lifted the spell he'd put on himself, and realized that it was one the Aurors had taught him over the last few days. Interesting, he thought, that I can remember that. Of course, I actually lived through it, didn't just remember it as a planted memory. He then remembered that he'd also lived through his parents' deaths. He winced in pain. They weren't really alive, he told himself. They weren't really alive. But they sure felt alive.

As much to distract himself as anything else, he spent the time until landing deciding what to do once on the ground. He impatiently waited as the plane finally landed and taxied to the gate. He resisted the urge to Disapparate right then, but preferred not to leave anyone wondering where he'd gone. Thankfully, first class was the first section to deplane, and he thanked the flight attendants for their help as he followed the other passengers off the plane. Thank God I don't have to go through customs, he thought. He waited until they walked through an area with windows, and as soon as he could see where he was going, he walked away from the others, hid behind a pillar, threw on the Cloak, and Disapparated.

He mounted the Firebolt and flew upwards, until he had a good view of the entire airport and the surrounding area, then flew around to get a sense of where he was in relation to the nearest city. He didn't see anything big enough to be Tokyo, but there was a highway, and judging by the traffic, it had to be leading to the city. Deciding to follow it, he flew on.

From his altitude of about five hundred feet, he saw as he flew a mixture of small towns, forested areas, and very small farms. Squares of green no bigger than a large British house existed between homes; were they rice paddies? Must be pretty inefficient, he thought, to have farms or fields so small. He didn't see any livestock, though. Cars were fairly common, as were parking lots.

Flying at about the same speed as cars traveled on the highway, he saw the green slowly decrease and the number of buildings increase; parking areas became less common. Must be getting close to the city, he thought. He also began to see 15-20-story apartment buildings not

far from train stations. Wow, he thought, things must be pretty cramped here. He vaguely recalled seeing on Muggle television that Japan was a country of many people but little usable land.

Not a very nice-looking country, though, he mused as he flew over what was a good-sized city. He'd flown over factories, cargo loading areas, and other buildings unappealing to the eye, with none of the natural beauty of England's countryside. The only thing he'd seen that was remotely nice-looking was an attractively designed amusement park.

He saw several skyscrapers in the distance, and headed in that direction. Much as London was where one could find Diagon Alley, he imagined that Japan's main wizarding area was not far from Tokyo, which that had to be, as that was the only group of skyscrapers that could be seen. Also, landing in a small town led to greater chances that he'd be noticed, but he figured that he'd be less conspicuous in a big city, where there had to be quite a few non-Asians.

He increased his altitude, as he'd been flying at about the height of the tallest of the buildings. He was now over an obviously highly concentrated part of the city; there were a few parks, but not large ones, and a seemingly random mixture of office buildings and apartments. There were small areas with high concentrations of buildings, which he realized were train stations. He flew over a large station with over a dozen tracks leading in and out; he wondered if this was Tokyo's equivalent of King's Cross.

A few minutes later he reached the skyscrapers; even they, while not unattractive, didn't do much for the city's skyline. Just beyond the skyscrapers was a medium-sized park. Okay, that'll be fine, he thought. Realizing that the Cloak might not completely cover him from someone looking up as he descended, he decided to land on the top of one of the skyscrapers and Apparate to the ground. He found the closest one that overlooked the park, made sure no one else was on the roof, and landed.

Looking out over the park, he saw a... he wasn't sure what, but it looked like a small flash of light, coming from an area under several trees. He had no idea what it was, but some intuition told him that it

represented magic being used. He thought he should check it out, as it might lead him to wizards. He Apparated about twenty meters away, hopefully enough so that the Apparition sound couldn't be heard, at least not by any possible wizards. He wanted to observe the situation before doing anything.

Evidently not having been heard, he put away his broom and walked over to where he still saw flashes of... it wasn't light now; it looked more like energy, and it was coming from the wands of two men wearing what appeared to be ordinary Muggle clothes, and it was directed toward another man on the ground. Strange, he thought. What kind of spell are they doing, that has a visual effect for so long?

Quietly walking closer, he saw that while it appeared that the man on the ground was sleeping, his eyes were open, and he was obviously in pain or severe discomfort. The eyes of the men with wands out were filled with the kind of sinister enjoyment Harry had seen in the eyes of Death Eaters more than once. Having seen enough, he pointed his wand through the Invisibility Cloak, and fired a Full-Body Bind; the man obligingly stiffened, arms at his sides, and toppled over. Startled, his companion looked around, pointing his wand at nothing in particular, before a second later succumbing to the same fate. Harry was further surprised by the fact that he could see his own spells, even though he was sure he'd done them at an insufficiently high intensity for them to be visible.

Looking more closely at the figure on the ground, Harry saw that he was surrounded by a light, almost invisible energy field, as now were his tormentors. Harry took off the Cloak, and saw the eyes of the man on the ground go wide; he realized that the man was young, maybe not too much older than Harry himself, while his apparent tormentors seemed to be in their thirties. Harry did a general counter-curse that he'd learned from the Aurors, and it was effective. The young man slowly moved his arms, obviously having been frozen in place, though not in the same position as was always the case with the Full-Body Bind. He looked up at Harry in confusion; Harry felt he could understand why. "You okay?" he asked.

The man nodded slowly. "Sank you. Foo ah you?"

Harry extended a hand; the man took it, and Harry pulled him up. He couldn't understand why the necklace hadn't translated the man's question, then he suddenly realized it was because the man had spoken English, just with odd pronunciation. "My name is Harry. How about you?"

"I am... Hirokazu," the man said slowly. "Call me Kaz." He was a half a head shorter than Harry, with short black hair, thick eyebrows, and eyes that looked more Caucasian than Japanese, which he knew sometimes seemed quite narrow to Western eyes.

"Kaz," repeated Harry, trying to make the same sound, more like 'Kahz,' with the long 'ah' sound, which was a little unfamiliar to him.

Kaz looked at the men. "Interesting spell," he said, now speaking in Japanese; Harry heard the Japanese, but also heard the English translation in his head, more loudly. "Like the Freezing spell, but different. But, this is a little conspicuous, so..." Obviously having thought he was talking only to himself, he took out his wand and moved the frozen figures—one of whom was lying face down—over to the nearest tree, where it looked more like they were sleeping, albeit very stiffly. He turned back to face Harry. "Why are you here?"

"Just... visiting," responded Harry, realizing this wouldn't be the first time he had to answer such a question. "I finished Hog—Hogwarts, our magical school—I'm from England—and I wanted to travel around," he improvised, recalling that this was what Dumbledore had intended to do after his own graduation.

Kaz nodded. "We had better go away," he said, motioning to the men on the ground. "We should not to be here when the spell..." Harry now heard in Japanese 'nan to iu ka na,' but the voice in English said, 'how do you say.'

"Wears off?" Harry suggested.

Obviously surprised, Kaz asked in Japanese, "You can understand my Japanese?"

"I have a translation artifact," Harry explained.

"Ah. I didn't understand the last two words, but your device gave it to me in Japanese. Clever device," Kaz said in Japanese. Switching to English, he asked, "Do you mind if I speak in English? I have no chance to practice."

Harry shrugged lightly. "Sure." Looking at the two men, he saw again a light energy field around them. He was about to speak when Kaz did. "We should leave."

"Okay, but... what's that around them?"

Kaz frowned. "What you mean?"

"There's an energy field that's surrounding them," Harry said, pointing. "All around their bodies, like an inch away. Can't you see it?"

"No." Kaz peered closer, and shook his head. "I can't see anything."

"Strange," said Harry, but decided not to pursue it further. "Okay, you lead the way."

They walked toward the nearest large group of Muggles. "Even if the spell... wears off, they will not bother us here," said Kaz. "They do not make magic near... how do you say... not-magic-people."

"Muggles," Harry supplied.

Again, Kaz was surprised. "That is not the word. I was in America for a year. They have different word, but I cannot remember."

"There are some differences between English English and American English," explained Harry, recalling the use of strange words on American television shows. Funny, he thought, how almost everything I know about foreign countries, I know from Muggle television. It may be stupid a lot of the time, but at least you learn from it.

"Oh, I heard that. I will use your word. Mug-gles," he repeated slowly. "They will not bother us near Muggles."

“Why were they doing that to you, anyway?”

Harry caught the look of embarrassment on Kaz’s face, and wished he hadn’t asked. “It... takes long time to explain,” said Kaz, looking straight ahead. “But I thank you for help.”

Harry nodded. “No problem,” he said, resolving not to ask again.

“How did you see?”

Harry paused a second before realizing Kaz’s meaning. “I saw the energy from their wands,” he explained. “I could see it from a distance. I guess the spell they were using is usually visible.”

“No,” said Kaz emphatically. “I cannot see that spell; I think no one can. I am surprised you can.”

“Hmmm. Strange.”

“How long you stay here?”

“I don’t know yet. I haven’t decided.”

“No, I mean... how long you stay here... before now.”

“Oh, how long have I been here—“

“Been here, yes,” repeated Kaz, annoyed with himself. “I forgot English so much. How long have you been here?” Kaz seemed to be repeating the phrase for his own practice, so he would remember.

“I just got here today.”

“Where do you stay?”

“I don’t know yet. I have to find out about things like that. You’re the first wizard I’ve talked to in Japan.”

Kaz's eyebrows went high. "Didn't you come here by gaimusho?" Harry heard 'foreign ministry' in English, but that didn't make sense either. How could 'foreign ministry' be a mode of transportation?

Deciding to answer rather than seek clarification—he was beginning to wonder if communication would be a problem even with the artifact—he said, "No, I came here by plane."

Kaz's mouth hung open. "You came by plane? Wow, you really wanted the Muggle experience," he said in Japanese. In English, he added, "The... magic politics does not know you are here?"

"Magical government," Harry guessed in clarification. "No, I guess they don't."

Kaz chuckled. "I don't know what they do, but they will not be happy. They like to control everything. So..." Switching to Japanese, he said, "Sorry, English is too slow. You mean, you just got on a plane and flew over here, without contacting the government at all?"

"Nope," said Harry, not caring all that much. I wasn't in any condition to stand in line and do paperwork, he thought.

"Well, you probably should tell them at some point," suggested Kaz. "They're going to want to know."

"Why should they care?" wondered Harry. "I just wanted to visit, is all."

"They care about everything," said Kaz as they reached a large street and started walking in the direction of the skyscrapers. "Another Japanese wizard would just say, 'that's the way it is,' and that would be right. But since I was in America, I can see the difference. If you went to America like you came here, it would be no problem. They don't care who visits as long as you don't break the law. But here, the government is... I told Americans about what our government does, and one of them said it's a..." In English, he continued, "control freak." In Japanese, "If one person isn't doing what he should, they like to get involved. Not directly; they do it through the hierarchy."

“What hierarchy?” asked Harry.

“It’s difficult to explain, to someone who isn’t from here,” said Kaz. “It was hard to explain to Americans. There are about eighty thousand wizards in Japan. There are eight regions, and each region has nine or ten sub-regions. So, each sub-region has about a thousand people. Each sub-region has a leadership council; they’re supposed to be familiar with every one of those people. Basically, they are, but they’re especially familiar with the patriarch or matriarch of each extended family. That person could be responsible for anywhere between twenty and a hundred people.”

Wow, thought Harry. Smiling so Kaz would know it was a joke, he said, “Sorry, could you say that again, please?”

Kaz smiled in return. “Yes, that was the Americans’ reaction too. So, if someone did something wrong, like a teenager at school, the school reports it to the patriarch. He goes to the leadership council, and apologizes for what the teenager did. Then he goes to the teenager’s parents, tells them about it, and basically lets them know that they should be ashamed of themselves for raising such a disobedient and disrespectful son. They bow and scrape and apologize many times, then go to their child. They tell him how he’s brought disgrace to their family, and can only make up for it by being a good and obedient child, and continue doing so until approximately the end of time.”

From Kaz’s tone and face, Harry gathered that this had happened to him, that he had once been that teenager. “So, you’re saying that... they keep close tabs on everyone.”

“I’d never thought about it until I went to America. That was just the way things were. But I learned quite a lot there, including that they have nothing like that there. Once you’re an adult, you’re basically free. But here, even if you’re thirty-five, if you do something strange, or that looks bad, your parents or patriarch will sit you down and let you know that you’re doing something wrong, and don’t you want to be a good citizen? Of course, you do, you say. You apologize, and make sure that whatever it was you did, you don’t do again. But you, in Western countries...”

“Can hop on a plane if we feel like it,” Harry joked.

“Yes, exactly,” agreed Kaz. “How old are you?”

“I’ll be eighteen next month,” said Harry. He suddenly recalled that in the test, he’d been told it was his birthday. He’d thought it was, but it wasn’t. He realized that the test had made him believe it was—probably it was that way for everyone who took the test—so there would be a plausible reason for his family and friends to all be together. He tried to squelch the sudden, extremely unpleasant memory. “How about you?”

“Twenty-one,” answered Kaz, looking at Harry.

Harry couldn’t hide his surprise. “Really? You look younger. No offense.”

“Everyone in America said the same thing. They always said I looked fifteen or sixteen, even though I was eighteen. Is your age of adulthood eighteen?”

“Seventeen.”

“So, you’re an adult. I suppose England doesn’t care if you get on a plane and fly away. But if a twenty-year-old Japanese did that... well, I can only imagine. It would be a crisis, something the whole sub-region would know about. The person would have to spend days apologizing when he got back.”

Harry was surprised at how often the word kept coming up. “It sounds like a lot of apologizing goes on here.” They turned onto a large street, and were now regularly passing Muggle pedestrians. Harry saw another Westerner, but almost everyone was Japanese.

Kaz nodded, with a small grin. “I really annoyed my American friends, when I first went over there. I was constantly apologizing. They started calling me ‘the apologist,’ even though the meaning is a little different. They slowly broke me of the habit of apologizing all the time, for things like not agreeing with everything they thought, or not

understanding what they said, or a hundred other things. So, can you guess what happened when I got back to Japan?”

“I have no idea.”

“Within a week, I was being criticized by my friends and family—“

“Because you weren’t apologizing enough,” Harry guessed.

“Yes,” said Kaz in English. Harry had a feeling there was more to the story, but Kaz had fallen silent. Harry decided he would be very careful not to ask the kinds of questions that he himself wouldn’t want to answer.

“Is the Muggle world like that? Things are the same way?”

“No. It used to be—at least, somewhat—but things changed for them. We learned about it in our Muggle Studies class. The first change was a hundred and fifty years ago, when foreign Muggles, more advanced technologically, came to Japan. The second was fifty years ago, when Japan was defeated in a war, by America. Do you know about that?”

“Vaguely,” said Harry. “I didn’t take Muggle Studies. But I grew up, until age eleven, in the Muggle world. So I heard about it, a little.”

“Anyway, so those things caused the Muggles to change their culture. Their families became less connected, young people were more free to go their own way. Young adults could decide who to marry, or even not to get married, like that. They didn’t need their family’s permission. They lived more in big cities, away from their extended family. Japanese wizards learn about this in Muggle Studies as kind of a warning.”

“Like, we have to make sure this doesn’t happen to us?” guessed Harry.

“Exactly. They say, this is what happens if you forget about your responsibility to other people, to society. Japanese wizards have a phrase about the... chains of society. How did that word translate?”

“Chains?” asked Harry.

“Yes. It could be ‘chains’ or ‘links,’ he said, saying the words in English. “Really, the word translates more as ‘chains,’ but Japanese wizards would probably prefer ‘links,’ because it has the feeling of connection. So does ‘chains,’ but ‘chains’ has the other meaning of keeping someone prisoner, like, in chains. I once made some wisecrack about being ‘strangled by the chains of society.’ You know what happened after that?”

“A lot of apologizing?”

“You’re catching on,” affirmed Kaz. They walked on for a minute in silence.

“What goes on in those buildings?” asked Harry, gesturing to the skyscrapers.

Looking surprised to be asked, Kaz shrugged. “I don’t know. Usual Muggle things, I suppose. Mostly business offices. A few hotels. Why?”

“I don’t know. This is Tokyo, right? I guess... it looks like any other city. I thought it would look more... exotic, maybe.”

“Like there should be fancy lanterns, and everyone should be wearing kimonos?” asked Kaz wryly.

“Something like that,” admitted Harry.

“Well, the magical world is a little more like that. Before I told you about the ‘chains of society’ thing, I was going to say that the wizarding world is still pretty much like the Muggle world was then. I don’t mean exactly, of course. There are differences. But yes, a lot of the Americans thought the same thing.”

They walked around for another hour, Kaz showing Harry around the Muggle downtown area, talking about what Muggles’ lives were like, but not saying much about how wizards lived. Harry wanted to ask

why Kaz spent time in Muggle areas, and why he was in that park, but didn't.

Kaz suggested lunch, and they ate at a ramen restaurant. Guess I'm going to be trying lots of unfamiliar foods, thought Harry. The ramen's not bad, like a kind of salty noodle soup.

Kaz offered to help Harry change Galleons into Japanese Muggle currency, but couldn't help with Japanese wizard money. Harry almost asked why, but again restrained himself.

They talked for a while about England, both Muggle and wizard, and Kaz talked about his experiences in America. He had generally had a good time, although it had taken him half a year to acclimate himself to the very different culture and lifestyle.

Around mid-afternoon, Kaz asked, "So, you have no idea what you're going to do, or where you're going to stay?"

Harry shook his head. "Not really." He thought Kaz had already asked the question, but he answered it anyway, to be polite.

"If you like, you can stay at my place for a day or so, until you figure it out," offered Kaz.

Harry was very surprised, but now understood why Kaz had asked a second time. "Sure, thanks," he said. "But are you going to have enough room?"

Kaz grinned. "Japan is a small country, so one thing Japanese wizards know how to do is increase the apparent space of a room. Anyway, it's no problem. You can teach me some British spells."

"Sure. You learned some in America, right?"

"Oh, yeah. And I tried to teach them to people here, but nobody seemed to want to learn them. It was as if being from America made them somehow suspect. Of course, that's not surprising for Japanese people."

“Do most Japanese think their spells are better than American spells, or any other country’s spells?” asked Harry.

Kaz thought for a minute before answering. “Not exactly. Japanese think their spells are more... Japanese than other countries’ spells.”

Taken aback, Harry frowned. “Well, obviously. But what does it mean to say that?”

“That’s something that Japanese wizards are afraid even young Japanese will start asking, or, not knowing the answer to. But first, let’s go this way. My apartment’s over in that direction. It should take about a half hour to walk.”

“Don’t you just usually Apparate there?” asked Harry.

“Yes. But you’re with me, so we have to walk. It’s no problem, I don’t mind getting the exercise.”

“I know, but couldn’t you just take me there by Side-Along Apparition?”

“Oh, no. That’s illegal here.”

“Why?”

“I never thought of that. I don’t know, it just is.”

“But they’d never catch you, right?”

“You’re a lot like the Americans,” said Kaz. “They’d break the rules, or even the law, for no good reason, just because they felt like it. For most Japanese, it’s pretty much unthinkable to break the rules, even for a good reason.”

“I wasn’t saying you should do it,” said Harry, slightly abashed. “Just that they wouldn’t catch you.”

“No,” agreed Kaz, “but there’s a better chance—at least, they say—of getting splinched if you do that. They know if you get splinched, and

they come quickly to help you. But if you got splinched doing that, well, you can guess what would happen.”

“Apologizing,” Harry guessed with a small grin.

“Lots of apologizing, lots of lectures, and so forth,” agreed Kaz. He gestured, showing Harry which way to go.

“Is there any kind of punishment in this country that doesn’t just involve apologizing?”

“Yes,” answered Kaz. “But apologizing is more usual. Your culture doesn’t mind using force, making someone do something. Japanese culture doesn’t like that. You’re supposed to do something on your own, to recognize it as the right thing to do. To make someone do something by force would be to admit that persuasion has failed, and suggest that your leadership is lacking. It also seems to be giving up on any hope of the other person realizing that they did something wrong, and being a good citizen. So, that’s only a last resort.”

“Wow,” said Harry. “Very strange. I never would have thought about anything like this.”

“No, me neither. That’s the good thing about going overseas.”

Kaz told a few more stories about his time in America, and soon they were in front of a very narrow eight-story building. “This is it. There’s an elevator, but it doesn’t stop on the fourth floor, which is where I live. We can walk up the fire escape, and next time, you’ll be able to just Apparate up.” They started up the steps.

“Why doesn’t the elevator stop at the fourth floor?”

“Because Muggles think this building doesn’t have a fourth floor. A spell I did on the building makes everyone forget that there’s a fourth floor.”

“Don’t they think it’s strange that the building doesn’t have a fourth floor?”

Kaz grinned over his shoulder. "You'd think so, but no. In your country, yes. But in Japan... 'four' is considered an unlucky number, because one of the ways to say it is 'shi,' which also means 'death.' For example, if you're giving someone a gift, you never give them four of something. Three or five, okay, but not four." They paused in front of the apartment's back door. "Now, most buildings do have a fourth floor. But because four is unlucky, nobody thinks it's strange that this one doesn't."

"Interesting," said Harry. It occurred to him that Kaz was committing a form of theft by not paying rent; the owner was being denied rent on a building he paid to have constructed. But Harry said nothing, because Kaz had been friendly and hospitable, and because he himself had done something not too different very recently.

Kaz opened the door. "Tadaima!" he shouted; Harry heard it as, "I'm home!"

"Okaeri!" shouted a female voice from inside; strangely, Harry's artifact didn't render this at all. Noting that Kaz took his shoes off, Harry quickly did the same. "I have a guest!" Kaz said loudly.

A slim, pretty young woman approached them, smiling politely. To the woman, Kaz said, "This is Harry, he helped me out in the park earlier." Harry saw a look of concern flash across the woman's face. "Harry, this is my girlfriend, Chieko."

Harry hesitated, unsure of whether to offer his hand; she bowed, so he awkwardly attempted to do the same. "Nice to meet you," she said.

"You too," he replied, and they walked into the living room, which was surprisingly large. He sat in a chair, while they took the sofa. "Where are you from?" she asked, and Harry gave much of the basic information about himself that he'd already given Kaz.

"Why did you come to Japan?" she asked.

Harry had answered the same question from Kaz already, but had spent a long time talking to him, and felt that he could give more

information. "I'm... mourning the loss of my parents. I wanted to get away from things."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said quickly, clearly embarrassed at having asked a question that elicited such a response.

"I think what she meant," put in Kaz, "was, why did you choose to come to Japan, not another country."

"Oh," said Harry, now a little embarrassed himself. He explained what he had done at Heathrow. Chieko's eyes widened; Kaz chuckled softly. "That seems like a very Western thing to do," he said. "We couldn't imagine doing something like that, even in that situation. But I'm sorry about your parents. Would it be okay if I ask how they died?"

Harry nodded. "Dark wizards."

"Do you have many of them in England?" asked Kaz.

"They were controlling the government for a while. But their leader was recently killed, and we got our government back. There are still some around, but it's not as bad as it was. How about here?"

Chieko looked at Kaz, who answered. "Not many, but there are a few. Not so dangerous; they don't kill people. The ones you saw in the park... they aren't Dark wizards, but they may be in the future. It's usually ronin who become Dark wizards."

Harry frowned. "I've heard that word before, I think."

"Some foreigners know it," agreed Kaz. "In historical times, both for Muggles and for wizards, it meant a samurai who had no master. Now, for wizards, it means a wizard who's been made an outcast by wizarding society. They can't go into the wizarding areas of Japan, join any wizarding events, live in wizarding homes, or even see their family or visit their ancestors' graves. They're essentially treated as if they're dead. They're usually people who've done something unforgivable." He gave Harry a significant look. "For which apologizing isn't enough."

“But they’re not all bad,” said Chieko forcefully. “Sometimes they just did something that most of society really disapproves of, or didn’t want to live by society’s rules.”

Harry nodded and kept his expression neutral, but it finally clicked: Kaz was also one of these ronin, which was why he lived in a Muggle area. He was being tormented in the park, most likely, because Japanese Aurors wouldn’t protect an outcast, so bad ronin could attack other ronin without consequences. Chieko, he realized, was probably breaking rules by seeing Kaz. Not everybody followed the rules, apparently; it was just a matter of not getting caught. He wondered what Kaz had done, but knew not to ask. He decided he would trust for now that Kaz had probably done nothing that would be considered a serious crime in England.

He changed the subject, and the conversation didn’t return to any topic related to ronin. They talked about smaller things, like what classes Harry took at Hogwarts, what kind of food they served, and whether there were house-elves in Japan (there weren’t). They all moved out to the kitchen when Chieko started to make dinner, which was homemade curried rice and salad. As they ate, they talked more about food; Kaz talked more about his impressions of the food in America.

Harry started to get tired—he wondered if he hadn’t completely caught up on his sleep from the goblin experience, which had technically happened only two days ago—and asked if they minded if he went to bed.

“Of course,” said Kaz. “Would you like to take a shower or bath first? I don’t know about England; most Americans take showers, and most Japanese take baths.” Chieko left the room to set up the bath.

Harry explained that he usually took showers, but a bath sounded good too. Kaz explained that in Japan, one sat on a small wooden stool with a hand-held shower nozzle to clean one’s body, then once clean, sat in the bath, and the same water could be used by everyone in the home, as it didn’t get dirty.

Harry's puzzlement was apparent. "I thought the whole idea of a bath was to get clean. What's the point of taking a bath if you're already clean?"

"For you, the point of a bath is to get clean," said Kaz. "For Japanese, the point is to relax in nice, hot water, especially at the end of the day. People here almost never take baths in the morning. If they clean themselves in the morning, it's a shower."

Harry could hear the water running from the shower area, which he had already learned was separated from the toilet, unlike in most Muggle households, in which the toilet and bath/shower were in the same room. The Japanese way struck him as being very sensible, given the number of times at Privet Drive when he'd had to use the toilet but couldn't because someone was taking a shower. It sounded like the bathtub was filling up. "Okay, I'll try the bath," he said. It occurred to him that he hadn't had a real bath or shower since before he was kidnapped, though he imagined that Kingsley had done a basic cleaning spell on him when he was rescued, and he had done one on himself on the plane. Still, it was only a stopgap measure, so a good shower and bath was probably a good idea. Chieko showed him how to use the stool and how to make the bath water warmer or cooler, and left him alone.

Harry took off his clothes, intending to rinse them and put a drying spell on them so he didn't have to hang them up. He took his glasses off, and to his surprise, found that his sight was no different. Perplexed, he picked a spot on the wall farthest away from him in the room, and compared with glasses on or off: it was the same. How did that happen, he wondered.

But an even greater surprise awaited. As he finished taking his clothes off, but before using the water, he found that even with the door closed, he could hear Kaz and Chieko talking in the living room, or maybe it was the kitchen. He picked up their conversation in mid-sentence.

"...he seems like a nice person."

“Yeah, I think he is,” said Kaz. “He helped me out, and he didn’t have to. You know that most Japanese would look the other way, thinking that it didn’t involve them.”

“Well, that’s because you’re ronin. It depends on the situation—“

“I mean, if a Japanese were in another country—“

“Well, obviously,” she agreed. “You mean, like he’s in another country, for him.”

“Exactly. This was one of the things I liked about Americans. They just do what they think is right, most of them anyway, they don’t think about how it’s going to look or what trouble they might get into. That’s why I respect him. I’ve told you that I had a similar situation when I was in America, and I—“

“You can’t hold that against yourself,” she countered; Harry could hear frustration in her voice. “Any of us would have done the same thing. It’s just your culture. They should have understood that.”

“They didn’t,” said Kaz ruefully. “They thought I was a big coward.”

“They didn’t actually say that, did they?”

“No. But the things they did say, the tone, the faces... it couldn’t have been clearer.”

“Hiro-kun, you’re not a coward.”

“How do you know? How can I know? Except for that time, I never had a chance to prove it one way or another. But there’s one thing I can tell about Harry: he isn’t any kind of coward.”

Harry turned the water on, and the sound of the water coming from the shower head obscured their voices. But he knew he shouldn’t have been able to hear them at all. He thought about it more carefully as he soaped himself up.

Let's see, he thought, what's different about me since yesterday... I can suddenly see better, and unless these walls are no thicker than paper, I can hear better... and maybe it's just Japan, but I can see the energy of any spells being done, which I could never do before...

A chill went down his spine as the answer suddenly hit him. Auror Leader, he thought. The device must change you if you pass their test. It must enhance your senses, or give you better... whatever. What else? Sight, hearing... those would be useful for an Auror, what else... power? It's hard to say, right now... Dudley! He was lying, and I knew it, but I didn't know how I knew. This must give the Auror Leader Legilimency, or the equivalent, the ability to know if someone is lying... that would definitely be a useful skill for an Auror.

Damn Kingsley for putting me in that thing. How could he do that? I don't want to be modified, I just want to be who I am. Least he could have done is ask me. I thought he was my friend, but I guess I should have known better. He's a politician now, and he'll do what he wants to do, it doesn't matter who it affects, or how it affects them...

Similar thoughts occupied him as he finished washing himself and shampooing. He put a foot into the tub, then yanked it out. Jesus Christ, this thing is hot, he thought. Screw it, I'll just go all the way in, my body'll get used to it. He was acutely uncomfortable for a few seconds, after which the discomfort subsided, faster than he would have thought. The tub was a peculiar shape; English tubs were long and relatively shallow, but this tub was almost cube-shaped, about three feet in each direction. One had to keep one's knees bent, but it was fairly comfortable.

It was quiet again, but he heard no conversation coming from the other room. He tried to focus on the relaxing heat; after a few minutes, he found he could see the appeal.

He stayed in for about fifteen minutes, deciding to get out after his eyes started to close involuntarily. Don't want to fall asleep in here, he thought. He got out, dried off, and put on new clothes from his bag, annoyed with himself for not having brought sleepwear. He went out to say good night, and found that Chieko had gone. Kaz explained that she didn't live there, but sometimes spent time there. Harry

thanked Kaz for his help, and went to bed. He was asleep very quickly.

* * * * *

Harry was mildly chagrined to learn the next morning from Kaz that he'd slept for almost twelve hours, but he knew he'd needed it. For breakfast, Kaz offered Harry a choice of cornflakes, or rice and something called miso soup. Harry chose the latter, finding the rice sticky but good-tasting, and the soup salty but palatable. Kaz offered to take Harry to a Muggle business where one could exchange gold for Muggle money; Harry gratefully accepted. Kaz tried to stick to English, keeping the conversation simple.

As they walked, Harry asked Kaz what, aside from the apologizing, were the big differences between Japan and America. "Almost night and day," mused Kaz in Japanese as he thought about it. "I guess a big thing is that Americans have fairly loose relationships with their families, and once you're an adult, you can do anything you want. But I think I mentioned that yesterday. Let's see... oh, yes, Americans are always telling you what they think of something. If some topic gets brought up, they'll just come out and say whatever they think."

Harry nodded. "Well, why wouldn't they?"

"I suppose that the English are, maybe not the same as Americans, but much closer to them than to Japanese. Again, it's difficult to explain, but giving an opinion is sometimes... presumptuous. It has a lot to do with the hierarchy. Let's say I'm older than you."

"You are," Harry pointed out.

Kaz grinned momentarily. "Let's say we're both Japanese, and I'm older than you. There's a book, a fiction book that we've both read. You happen to say that you thought it was terrible. In your culture, that's no problem, right?" Harry shook his head. "Well, here, that would be a big faux pas. I'm older than you, so you shouldn't say what you think until I have, or until I asked you. Now, if I want to give you my opinion, I can; from me to you, it's like guidance, because I'm older. My opinions have more weight—"

“Even if you’re only three years older than me?”

“Yes. And interrupting someone older than you is very rude.”

Harry looked down, as if chastened. “Sorry.”

Kaz looked at him quizzically. “You’re joking, right?” Grinning, Harry nodded. “I was constantly falling for that in America,” recalled Kaz ruefully. “Half of what friends said to me were jokes, and I never got it. I was just starting to at the end, before I came back here.

“Anyway... oh, and just for your information, just ‘sorry’ isn’t enough. If you were rude to someone older, you say ‘I’m sorry’ at the very least, but ‘I’m very sorry’ is better.”

“How about ‘I deeply and sincerely apologize?’” joked Harry.

“A little too much for this situation, but it couldn’t hurt,” responded Kaz. “And I know you were joking, but it’s less a joke than you think. Anyway, the book... now, if we’re the same age, it depends on our relationship. If we’re good friends, it’s okay. If we’re acquaintances, or don’t know each other that well, you can only hint at your opinion, say something very mild until you know what the other person thinks. If they hint the opposite, you drop the subject. If they seem to agree with you, then you can say your opinion more strongly.”

Harry shook his head. “Bizarre.”

“It’s all about avoiding conflict,” said Kaz. “A disagreement about anything, even so unimportant as opinions about a book, could become an argument, and that must be avoided. Japanese will go to great lengths to avoid an argument. Not talking about it is considered far preferable.”

Harry recalled times when he’d been angry at Ron or Hermione but said nothing. “Well, we do that a little, especially for serious things. It depends on the person. But it’s certainly okay to say what you think about a book. Is that why there are so many rules about what you can and can’t do, to avoid arguments?”

"I'm not sure. At some point, it always gets back to 'that's just the way things are.' It's hard to say how a culture got a certain way. I guess you can say that the rules are the way they are because the culture is the way it is."

"How do you feel about the culture being the way it is?"

Kaz shrugged. "Before I went to America, I just accepted it without thinking. It never occurred to me that another thing was possible. But seeing another culture allows you to understand not only that one, but also your own. Once I got used to American culture, it was more appealing to me. The freedom was great. You can do what you want, say what you want, without having to explain yourself to anyone who decides it's their business what you do. Life in America, or I guess most Western countries, is more unpredictable. Life in Japan is safer, nothing unexpected ever happens. But it never occurs to Japanese that their way of life is kind of constricting. There's a way you're supposed to act, and that's that."

Very interesting, thought Harry. "What are the good things about the Japanese way, other than that it's safe?"

Kaz grunted. "I may not be the best person to ask. I'm not a huge fan of the Japanese way of doing things. Those who are will say it's comfortable, it feels good to be a group member in good standing. They'll talk about tradition, say it's been this way for centuries, as if that's a good reason to continue doing something. They'll say it creates social harmony. Stuff like that."

"But it wasn't good for you," Harry observed.

"Especially not after I came back from America. If you talked to the people who knew me, they'd say I came back changed, acting strange. But I think that they were too ready to think that. I tried to act normal, and I thought I was doing okay, and they seized on the least little thing to suggest I'd changed. I feel like I changed more because of how they treated me than anything else. It suddenly seemed like I wasn't welcome."

“What happened to the social harmony thing? Does it go out the window when someone changes?”

“They accused me of throwing it out the window, by doing things that threatened social harmony. The way they see it, they’re defending social harmony, by attacking someone who endangers it. I was the disease, and they were the white blood cells.”

Kaz stopped talking; Harry wondered if he felt he was personalizing the situation too much, saying things he didn’t want to say. He steered it back to a more general topic. “So, if someone is older than you, you have to treat them as if they’re your boss?”

Kaz thought for a few seconds, then nodded. “You would see it like that, yes. I think you don’t have the equivalent. But I was told that in America, some schools had something like that, where younger students had to be polite to the older students. Hogwarts wasn’t like that?”

“Not really. Most of the time, people just stayed with their own year’s students. If there was any mixing, older students didn’t expect younger students to be especially polite. But if, in the common room, younger students tried to take a spot that an older student liked, or was really rude, then the older student would act like, get out of here, who do you think you are, like that. And I’ve heard that it was much more strict, the seniority thing, at Muggle private schools, the exclusive ones. I don’t know why Hogwarts is different.”

Kaz switched back to English. “Did you have a good fright?”

Harry had begun to realize that Kaz’s English was fairly rusty. “A good what?”

“A good fright. Airplane fright.”

“Ah. I heard, ‘good fright’ the first time.” Harry knew his necklace artifact would translate it back into Japanese.

Kaz chuckled. “I see. L and R is always a problem.”

Harry realized he hadn't answered the question. "Anyway, the flight was okay. It was the first time I'd ever flown, so it was kind of strange. Obviously I've flown a lot on brooms, but this was different. I slept through a lot of it, so it seemed to go pretty fast." He found that he wasn't thrilled to talk about the flight, because it reminded him of what he'd been thinking about and was now trying to get away from, but Kaz couldn't know that. "Did you fly to America?"

"No, I went by the... Foreign Ministry," he finished in Japanese.

"You said that yesterday. What does that mean?"

In Japanese, Kaz said, "At the Foreign Ministry—of every country, I was told—there's a kind of portal. Two countries activate their portal at the same time, and someone can walk through. It feels very strange; it actually takes more than a minute to walk through. It's like you're walking from one place to another which is thousands of miles away, but you do it very quickly. Most of what I saw was ocean; when you're passing over land, everything's a blur. They don't let you go through if you're not in good health, because if you fall down on the way, there's a chance you could end up someplace in the middle. In my case, that would have been the Pacific Ocean. But it was interesting."

"A lot faster than the flight," Harry agreed. While Kaz was talking, Harry had noticed a bright spot on Kaz's head, seemingly in his hair. "What's that thing on your head?"

"What thing?"

"In your hair here, there's a little bit of energy, as if someone did a spell there, and there's a trace of it. Does that make any sense?"

"Not really. I haven't noticed anything in the mirror, but maybe I couldn't see it anyway. I don't seem to be able to see the spells like you can."

"What do you think it could be?"

Comprehension and annoyance spread over Kaz's face. "A tracking spell," he said angrily. "Those ronin harassing me in the park, they'd bothered me before. They must have put that there so they could find me if they wanted to. Can you get rid of it?"

"I think so," said Harry. "But you need to stand absolutely still." Harry moved Kaz's hair a little on the side of his head, found the remnant of the spell, and performed a counter-curse. The energy dissipated. "Okay, I think I got it. I don't see it there anymore."

"Thanks, I appreciate it," said Kaz, as they continued walking. "The place we're going is just up there, another few minutes." There were a few Muggles around, but it wasn't a heavily trafficked area.

"Is it common for people to use tracking spells here? My impression from England was that they're not easy spells to do. Even Aurors can't do one that lasts too long." The memory came from Harry's 'other life,' as he was starting to think of it, but based on what Kingsley had said, he was inclined to think it was accurate.

"Nobody I talked to in America had ever heard of one," said Kaz. "Here, they're fairly common. Most parents, I think, routinely use them on their children. Some people say that they think patriarchs use them on some people, adults, in their extended families without their consent."

"That wouldn't be illegal?" wondered Harry.

Kaz shrugged. "Patriarchs can do pretty much anything they want, I think. The laws are selectively enforced, and they get a wide latitude."

"Yeah, but they're old. What if they start losing it, and do some weird stuff?"

Kaz chuckled. "I once said something like that to my parents, and... there was much apologizing," he said, switching to English at the end. "Even speaking generally, you just can't say something like that. Even if it's true, that's not the point. But the most that would happen—"

Harry heard several pops of Apparition; to his surprise, they were suddenly surrounded by five men, aged from thirty to fifty. He reflexively reached for his wand, and backed slightly toward the nearest building, trying to keep all five in front of him.

Spells started to come at him. It was the first time since the Auror Leader trial that hostile spells had been shot at him, and it felt strange to be able to see them coming. They moved fast, but not overly fast. Moving aside quickly, he dodged three, while blocking one with his own spell. To his great surprise, Kaz instantly Disapparated. He didn't linger on the thought, as he still had to deal with the five men. He Disarmed one; the man's wand went flying, and the man went off to chase it. Harry realized that with five against one, Disarming wasn't going to be enough. After dodging and blocking the next round of spells—it was extremely helpful to be able to see them—he fired a Stunner at one of the attackers, who went down. He quickly sent off another Stunner, putting another attacker on the ground. The one he had Disarmed had recovered his wand and was running back to join the fight when there were four more Apparitions, all almost in the same instant. The men wore black robes with silver trim. Aurors, thought Harry. Have to be. He knew the confrontation was over, and made a decision to cooperate with them, except that he wouldn't give up the Elder Wand if they asked for it.

The Aurors whirled their wands in unison, and Harry saw four jets of light meet in one place, whirl around each other, and form a circle of energy around him and his attackers. One of them pointed a wand at the Aurors, and was immediately Stunned. Impressive spell, thought Harry. I'd love to learn that. He put his wand into his robes and involuntarily checked the fingernail of his left index finger; it was still bright, so his bag with all his supplies was secure.

"Wands down!" shouted one of the Aurors, who Harry assumed was the senior one, as he appeared older than the others. To his surprise, they made no move to take any wands. An Auror approached him, glanced at him with surprise, and grasped his left arm. Harry didn't resist as he was Disapparated away.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 14, The Honored Ancestor: Struggling to put aside his grief and adapt to an unfamiliar culture, Harry has an unpleasant encounter with a ghost, an ancestor of his host family.

From Chapter 14: "Harry, you did the right thing."

"It doesn't feel like it."

"I know, that's the point. It's horrible, and Kingsley is scum for not getting your permission... but everyone knows that's the thing to do. That's not the question; the question is whether you can do it. All I can say is... Ron and Hermione know that they were in... that last scene. They both said they thought you did the right thing. And they were both proud that they were important enough to you to be there."

Chapter 14

The Honored Ancestor

The Japanese Auror Apparated Harry into a small, sparsely furnished room which had in the corner a small stand, on which stood a small flower vase and a few flowers. Odd place to hold detainees, he thought. Glancing at the floor, he saw that it seemed to be made of a finely woven form of straw, or at least, it smelled like something that had once been part of a plant. The room had white walls, and a sliding window with opaque glass.

“Do you understand me?” asked the Auror. Harry nodded. “Sit on the floor, and do not touch your wand. Do not move. Someone will be in to question you.” Harry nodded again; the man gave him a last, odd look, and departed through a wooden sliding door.

Interesting, he thought. Why didn’t they try to take my wand? Maybe it’s not their custom; maybe the bad guys play by certain rules here, and they don’t break them. Or maybe they know I’m not a bad guy. Who knows... Well, if they try to take the Elder Wand they’re going to regret it, but let’s see how it goes. Probably the best thing to do is cooperate, they’ll realize I did nothing wrong, and that’ll be that. I hope.

Five minutes passed before another man came into the room; it was the senior man who had appeared on the scene. “Stand, please.” Harry got up. The man waved his wand; energy flowed towards Harry’s forehead, but nothing happened. The man looked at Harry quizzically. After a short pause, he said, “You do not have the mark that shows your permission to be in Japan.”

Harry’s eyebrows went up. “I don’t know anything about that. I wasn’t aware that permission was necessary.”

The Auror looked a little surprised, then resumed his prior poker face. “Your wand will not be taken so long as you cooperate. If you do not, it will be taken. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand.”

“How are you understanding me?”

“Translation artifact.”

The Auror reached into his pocket and took out a small white ball, or what looked like a ball. “A person cannot lie when holding this. Do you agree to be questioned while holding it?”

Harry couldn’t help but wonder if the question was rhetorical. “Yes, I agree.”

The man handed it to Harry, who kept it firmly in his palm. “What is your name?”

“Harry Potter.”

Harry thought he saw the Auror register familiarity and surprise, but he wasn’t sure. Would news of his defeat of Voldemort have reached this far? Would another country’s Aurors care about such a thing?

“Where are you from?”

“England.”

“How did you get here?”

“Muggle airplane.”

“You did not know you needed permission to come here?”

“Yes, I didn’t know.”

“Why did you come to Japan?”

“In London, I boarded a Muggle airplane not knowing where it was headed. It happened to be headed to Tokyo.”

The Auror now gave Harry a decidedly odd look, as if he wondered whether the device Harry was holding wasn’t working properly. After

a pause, the Auror continued. "Did you use a spell which deprives the victim of consciousness?"

Odd way to phrase it, thought Harry. "Yes."

"Why?"

"Well, you saw, it was five against one. They attacked me; I was defending myself."

"Why did they attack you?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't have a clue."

The Auror frowned. "Please answer more simply."

Maybe the phrase didn't translate well. "I don't know why they attacked me."

"What did you plan to do in Japan?"

"I had no specific plans. I wanted to be somewhere else, to get away from England."

"Why?"

"I... recently suffered a tragedy, and I could not bear to stay in England. I needed to get away."

"What kind of tragedy?"

Harry decided to be as polite as possible. "A family tragedy. Beyond that, I would request your indulgence; I would strongly prefer not to get into details. It's a very private and difficult matter."

The Auror paused again, seeming to evaluate Harry. Harry didn't keep eye contact, looking up only once in a while. He knew eye contact could be interpreted as defiance.

“Did this tragedy, or any events leading up to it, involve any wrongdoing on your part?”

Harry couldn't help the light chuckle that escaped him. “No.”

“What do you find funny?”

“It's not funny, exactly; it's ironic. The events leading up to the tragedy involved my being kidnapped. So, there was wrongdoing, just not by me.”

“Do you have any further comment?”

Harry realized that the interview was coming to a close; he decided to use the information he'd gotten from Kaz, and hope it worked all right. “Yes, I'd like to apologize for coming to your country without the proper permission. I was... distraught, and didn't properly consider what I was doing. It was not my intention to break any laws, or do anything wrong.” Harry did his best to convey sincerity; it wasn't too difficult, since he was basically speaking the truth. The fact was that he didn't care that he had broken their laws, but they didn't have to know that.

The Auror again gave him another odd look—has this guy even seen a foreigner before? Harry wondered—and finally nodded curtly. “You will stay here indefinitely until a decision is reached regarding your status. In that wall is a closet containing a futon and blankets; next to that is a washroom. Meals will be delivered at regular intervals. Do you promise not to make any unauthorized attempt to leave?”

Harry managed not to grin at the convoluted wording that seemed to try to avoid using the word ‘escape.’ “Yes, I promise.”

Apparently satisfied, the Auror reached for the white ball, which unbeknownst to Harry had taken on the consistency of clay, and spread out in his hand. The Auror moved aside the sliding door, and left. Harry saw a light thread of magic suddenly appear outside the door; no doubt a movement detection spell that would alert them to any attempt he made to break the promise he'd made.

He walked over to a wall and sat on the floor, leaning against the wall. Well, he thought, as prison cells go, this isn't too bad. Beats the hell out of Malfoy Manor. A little stark, but that's a minor quibble.

Well, you wanted to get away from it all, and you've certainly done that. Normally, I'd be trying to figure out how to escape, but right now I don't care. They can keep me here for a month if they want to. Well, except for the lack of reading material, or anything to do. That would be a problem. But there's plenty of time to think.

What about Kaz, just Disapparating away at the first sign of trouble. Could he have set me up somehow? No, he didn't seem like that type. Also, there was that conversation between him and, what's her name, Chieko, about whether he was a coward. Who knows, maybe he is. Some people are. If that's it, he's probably kicking himself now, thinking he should have stayed. Probably frightened the hell out of him, five against two, and he doesn't know that I have any skill with a wand, or that I'm holding the Elder Wand. Maybe he was afraid that those guys from the park would do worse to him. Still, to leave someone else in danger while you get away... I just can't see it. How did those five guys, the ronin, find us? When I got rid of the tracking spell? Guess that makes sense, they just used his last known location. And the Aurors must have magic sensing methods, like they do in England. But why is a Stunning spell bad, but a Full-Body Bind is okay?

This sure is a weird country. Just look at this room. This is where they keep prisoners? Or is this just a kind of detainment area? Even detainment areas in England aren't this nice or clean, I'm sure. And being allowed to keep my wand is really bizarre, not that I'm complaining. Of course, the instant I touch it they can be in here to take it away, but still, in England they'd take it away just on principle. This is one time when having the Elder Wand isn't so good; I feel like I have to protect it. But who knows, it might let me Disapparate out of here, even given what anti-Disapparation safeguards they have in place. Could this thing let one Disapparate out of Hogwarts? Interesting question... how much power above the ordinary does this thing give me? I never bothered to check that out.

So, what happens now... they go to their government, I imagine, or maybe just to their court system. It would be very annoying to have to spend time in jail. The question is, do they contact England or not? If they do, Kingsley'll ask them to let me go, if he knows what's good for him. I can screw him politically, he must know that. Not that I'd want to bother, but he seriously owes me, and I don't know if I can ever forgive him for what he did. Necessary, my ass. You don't do that to a person without asking them, you just don't. I don't care what the reason is. Even if it could save lives, you ask, you tell the person it could save lives. If he asked me and I said no, maybe then those lives are on my shoulders, but at least I made the decision. You don't take that decision away from anyone you have respect for. Come to think of it, what if Kingsley asks them to turn me over to him? He'd better not, I will screw him if he does that. I'll just go somewhere else, after saying my piece in the Prophet. He'd better leave me alone.

Harry's mind turned to another topic, as thinking of Kingsley made him think of his parents, which he didn't want to do. His mind kept coming back to the topic, however, and he sighed internally. Maybe sitting in a bare room with nothing to do isn't such a good thing for me right now, he thought. Kind of tough not to think about that. Strange how I keep thinking about Mum and Dad, not Sirius or Ron or Hermione. With Sirius, he was already gone, and I could get to know him, even though I wish we'd had more time. With Ron and Hermione, they're still alive, so that's different too. I can still talk to them if I want to. But Mum and Dad... that was my one chance. It makes sense that I'd think mainly about that. But I should try not to, I'll just make myself crazy.

Here's an interesting question: if I could do anything in the world right now, what would I do?

Talk to my parents.

Okay, anything that's possible.

Hmmm... I just don't know. Nothing seems that appealing.

Okay, well... I'm in this country, let's say fate sent me here for a reason. Why not just try to learn more about the place, if they don't

keep me here forever, or chuck me out of the country. See if they have any interesting spells they'd be willing to teach me, or try to understand this goofy culture of theirs. What have I got to lose, I'm not doing much of anything anyway.

He lay flat on the floor, and thought about Hogwarts, his memories from there. There was no real reason to do so, except that it kept his mind off other things.

* * * * *

An hour later, a meal was brought, a simple affair of grilled fish, rice, and a few vegetables. To his surprise, it was brought by a young woman who bowed and generally behaved very politely. He wondered if they were always this polite to prisoners, or if he wasn't considered an ordinary prisoner. He was also surprised when instead of backing out of the room, she turned in the middle of the room and left, leaving herself open to possible attack if he were so inclined. He wondered if it was a test, to see if he would act violently and try to escape if given a chance. He ate all the food; she came by a half hour later to pick up the tray and dishes, and bowed another few times, but said nothing.

He tried to appreciate the fact that he had nothing to do. The time moved slowly, but there were positive aspects to it. It was a chance to relax, to regroup. To just do nothing. And look at the bright side: as long as they don't come in and tell me what a useless piece of crap I am, it's better than it was being at Privet Drive. Yes, there's a good way to look at it.

Hours passed; there were no windows leading to sunlight, so he had no idea what time it was, or whether it was light or dark. Another meal finally came, very similar to the last one. He thought it was a different kind of fish, but he wasn't sure.

A few hours later, the room's light—it looked like a fairly standard Muggle electric light—blinked on and off three times. He decided to interpret it as a signal that the lights would be going off soon. He took out the futon and bedding supplies from the closet and set them up; he had barely finished when the light went out. A very soft light was

still on in the toilet area. I guess, he thought wryly, they don't want me peeing all over the floor because I can't see what I'm doing. It didn't take him long to fall asleep.

* * * * *

He woke up to use the bathroom—again, he had no way of knowing what time it was, or how long he'd slept—and decided to sleep for as long as he wanted. The light'll probably go on again when it's time to wake up, he thought as he dozed off.

The next time he woke up, the light was already on. He very leisurely came to full consciousness, stretching often. Time for another exciting day in Japan, he thought sardonically. Which wall should I stare at? Now, now, it's a lot nicer than I had it with the goblins. At least here, I get to sleep.

Breakfast arrived in a half hour; interestingly, it was rice and miso soup, the same thing he'd had with Kaz yesterday morning. Must be a very standard Japanese breakfast.

After about two hours, the door opened and a kimono-clad young woman entered and bowed; Harry understood that something was happening, as it was a different woman than the one who brought his food. Having decided to try to act as it seemed like a Japanese should, based on what he'd learned from Kaz, he bowed a little in return. Seemingly surprised, she bowed yet again; Harry decided not to return it. Don't want to get caught up in an endless cycle of bowing.

She was holding a short wooden stick with two wood blocks attached to it by thick gold strings from the top. The blocks were about half the size of his palm, and had Japanese characters burned into them, though Harry of course had no idea what they meant. Gesturing to one of them, the woman's Japanese came through Harry's artifact as, "Please grasp the wood." Harry barely managed to stifle a giggle, realizing that the artifact, while doing a good job of translating, couldn't take into consideration amusing double meanings.

He put his hand around the one she'd indicated, and his guess that it was a Portkey was soon proved right. He found himself in another

room, this one much nicer, a real Western-style office. There was a large desk, and a comfortable chair behind it. There were what looked like bookshelves, but instead of shelves, there were circular slots, deep enough to hold rolled parchment, or a scroll. The general appearance reminded Harry slightly of a honeycomb. There were two such shelves, one on each side of the room. Artwork was hanging on the walls.

"Please sit down," the woman said, gesturing to one of the chairs opposite the large desk. Harry did; the woman bowed, and left without another word.

Harry looked around the room with mild interest, as he wondered what would happen now. He didn't have to wait for long; there was an Apparition sound, and an older man, appearing to be in his late sixties, suddenly appeared behind the desk. "You are Harry Potter?" he asked, without preliminaries. His manner was slightly brusque, as if he were being bothered with something he would prefer not to be bothered with.

Guess not everyone here is polite, Harry thought. "Yes."

"You really did not know that it was necessary to get another country's permission before traveling to that country?" Even if there had been no translation, the man's 'how stupid can you be' tone would have come through loud and clear.

Harry found his resolve to remain polite weakening. "Yes, that's right," he managed to say, rather than 'I've already answered that question while holding the White Clay Glob of Truth, so is it really necessary to ask again?' as he would have preferred to say.

The man grunted, then added as an afterthought, "I am Shintaro Watanabe, the foreign minister of Japan. Your case has caused us a great deal of consternation."

"I'm very sorry about that," replied Harry, glad that he was not currently holding the white glob. "It wasn't my intention."

Watanabe glanced up at Harry briefly, as if he hadn't expected to hear those words. Slightly less rudely, he continued. "Assuming that you are allowed to stay in Japan, what would you wish to do?"

"To learn," answered Harry. "To understand your people, your culture, your magic, how you live. It seems like a good thing for young wizards to know."

Watanabe eyed him with mild suspicion. "You said you came here by accident."

"Yes, but now that I'm here, it seems like a good idea. Sometimes when you do something spontaneously, you don't know why it's a good idea until after you've done it."

"Doing things spontaneously often causes problems for others," riposted Watanabe. "Did this not cause problems for those you left behind in England?"

That was something Harry didn't prefer to be reminded of, but he knew that in all honesty, it was a fair question. Thinking of Ron and Hermione, he said, "The people who care about me will understand why I did what I did. They know what I've been through, and they'll know I needed to get away." Probably, he added to himself.

"You said you wanted to learn about Japan," said Watanabe, with a slightly haughty air. "One thing you should know is that we consider quite carefully the impact our actions have on others. Actions never affect just the one person. Our society is the sum of our individual actions, so what one does affects all. We are taught from childhood to never forget this."

"I understand," said Harry politely.

"I would be surprised if you did," responded Watanabe. "You are quite young, and even many of our own people of your age do not understand this properly." He looked down at a parchment scroll; Harry said nothing, waiting. "Do you still wish to remain in Japan?"

Not if everybody is like you, Harry restrained himself from saying. Still, something about the country intrigued him; he found that he was curious to find out how it worked. “Yes, I do.”

“Relationships are valued in our country,” said Watanabe, as Harry fought back the impulse to point out that Japan was surely not the only country in which this was so. “The social fabric is very tight. The chains of society link us together, so disruptions are widely felt. I say this because those who wish to spend time in our country—those who apply and are accepted, in the proper way—are required to study twenty hours’ worth of background cultural materials so that they understand the cultural basics. If you stay, will you make every effort to learn what is needed to fit into the culture as a guest, causing the minimum possible amount of cultural disruption?”

In other words, do you promise to be a good boy and do what you’re told? “Yes, I will.”

Watanabe nodded. “It has been arranged, then, that you will stay as a guest with the family of my subordinate. You will, of course, be expected to follow all Japanese laws, and conform to cultural norms. It will be your host’s responsibility to inform you of those, and it is better that you ask your host before taking actions that could be disruptive if you are in any doubt. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I do.” Better to keep it short. If my host is anything like this guy, my stay here may be shorter than I thought. Still, better than a prison cell.

“Very well.” He Summoned the wood stick that Harry had used to transport there from his detainment area, then directed it to Harry, who reached for the handle. “Stand up, and grasp the one on the right.”

Harry did, and a second later found himself in another office, this one slightly smaller and more lived-in. He was greeted by the man behind the desk, who was younger—Harry guessed he was in his early fifties, perhaps Arthur Weasley’s age—than the one whose office he’d just left. But while the other man had been dour and slightly arrogant, this man was cheerful and friendly.

“Mr. Potter,” said the man, stepping out from behind his desk and offering Harry his hand, which Harry shook. “My name is Kenichi Sato. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He was slim, a few inches shorter than Harry, with black hair streaked with a little gray. His eyes seemed more expressive than those of any Japanese Harry had met so far; it seemed to Harry that this man was genuinely pleased to meet him. But who knows, thought Harry, maybe he’s just a good actor.

“Nice to meet you,” said Harry.

“Oh, please sit down,” said Sato.

Something occurred to Harry as they sat, Sato next to him rather than behind the desk. He noticed that he was hearing the man speak directly, not through the translation artifact. “You speak English?”

“Somewhat. Not as well as I would hope, but I do my best.” It sounded pretty good to Harry, though. His intonation was much more natural than Kaz’s, and his accent was very light.

“First, please allow me to tell you about myself,” continued Sato. “My position is Deputy Foreign Minister for English-Speaking Countries. I have spent three years overseas throughout my career, and sometimes deal with diplomats from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the U.S., and Britain, so English ability is necessary for my job. Partly because of my position, and my English ability, it has been decided that you will stay with me and my family while you are here.”

Harry nodded. “I’m sorry if I’m causing you any trouble.” He said it because he felt he was supposed to, but it was also more or less true.

“Oh, no, not at all,” said Sato enthusiastically. “Really, it’s our pleasure to have you. It will be good for my family to get to know you.” Harry wasn’t sure if he truly had the ability to tell whether someone was lying, but he could detect no lie in anything Sato had said.

“Well, thank you.”

“It’s no problem. Now, before we continue, I wonder if you could tell me exactly when you arrived, and what you have done since then, in as much detail as possible. It will help me to explain Japan to you if I find out what you already know.”

Harry sensed that there was also another reason for the question, but wasn’t sure if it was truly the case. Wondering to what extent he should talk about Kaz, he decided it was necessary—he didn’t want to start off with this man by lying, what he said could be verified, and there was no reason to think he should hide anything anyway. He decided only to omit any mention of Chieko; if he was a ronin but she wasn’t, she could get in trouble for visiting him. He took about fifteen minutes to tell the story. After he finished, he had a question for Sato. “Kaz said the people who attacked us, and him when I helped him, were called ronin, outcasts from society. I’m wondering, if they’re criminals, why not put them in jail, instead of making them outcasts? And why let them keep their wands?”

Sato looked uncomfortable. “To be honest, Potter-san—“

“Please, call me Harry.”

Sato nodded. “I understand your wish, which is common among Westerners, but in Japan, such a form of address would be considered disrespectful. Here, the standard form of address is to say the person’s last name followed by the honorific ‘san,’ much like ‘Mr.’ In English. A more casual form would be the person’s first name followed by ‘san.’ For example, when you are in my home, you should address everyone by first name followed by ‘san,’ mainly because if you called everyone ‘Sato-san,’ it would be confusing. But for others, using the last name is better.”

“I see. Well, could you call me ‘Harry-san’ then, at least?”

With a small grin, Sato nodded. “Of course. So, as I was saying... I would have preferred to inform you about the situation regarding ronin after you had learned more about Japanese society; that would have given you a better background to properly understand such things.” Harry thought about telling Sato he didn’t have to explain, but decided to let Sato decide.

“First, you have to understand that Japanese society is very close, with many interwoven relationships. We depend on the proper and responsible actions of others to maintain the cohesion of society. We have a phrase which can be translated as ‘the strong links of society’—“

Harry didn’t exactly interrupt; Sato had taken a slight pause to think, but Harry reminded himself of what Kaz had said about interrupting. “Watanabe-san,” he began, remembering at the last second to add the ‘san,’ “used the phrase, and my artifact gave it as ‘the chains of society.’ He wanted to avoid mentioning anything specific that Kaz had told him.

“That’s a common translation,” agreed Sato, “but I prefer ‘strong links’ because of the restrictive feeling of the word ‘chains,’ especially in English. The phrase is meant to convey a sense of connection, not restriction.

“The phrase emphasizes how connected we feel to each other, and our responsibility to each other. We have specific ways of relating to each other, more formalized than you would be used to. This is meant to reduce friction. To say it in a way you may understand better, let us say that you have an argument with someone you meet in a bar, someone you have never met. If you anger him, and he angers you, you may think it unimportant, because you will probably never meet him again. Here, we treat such a person as if they were someone we might have a future relationship with. For this reason, we are not as... frank as you would be in a similar situation. The better we get to know someone, the more frank we can be with them, but even that level would be less than it would be with you. Two of my Canadian friends were having lunch with me not long ago, and in the course of a friendly disagreement, one said to the other, ‘no offense, but you’re an idiot.’ Here, even among close friends, such a comment would be unthinkable.”

Harry grinned. “The one who said it probably thought he was being polite by saying ‘no offense.’ Not everyone would.”

“Indeed. This is one of the most difficult things for non-Japanese to get used to about being here. One cannot simply say whatever is on one’s mind as you can in your home country. Each relationship has a context, and there is a range of acceptable behavior within that relationship. This range is much narrower than it is for Westerners. The... what is the word... ah, yes, parameters of the relationship are much determined by the comparative status of the people. The status is determined largely by age, and to some extent by occupation or other factors.”

“Wealth?” asked Harry, thinking of the Malfoys.

“Oh, absolutely not,” said Sato, looking mildly taken aback. “Obvious displays of wealth are frowned upon here. We have currency, of course, but it is rather evenly distributed. We have merchants and entrepreneurs, but the government monitors their profits, and sees to it that no one becomes wealthy beyond a certain point. No, when I said ‘other factors,’ I was thinking of such things as family prestige or accomplishments, but those are not usually factors.

“Now, because of this societal closeness, rude or inappropriate behavior is a much more serious offense than it would be for you. Children are raised with great emphasis on the correctness of their social interactions. As with anything, some children are more difficult than others to teach; with such children, great efforts are made to guide them, to teach them how to deal with others. To take an extreme example, in your culture, someone who communicated only by shouting would be shunned before long. Our version of such a person would be someone who frequently and deliberately insulted, provoked, or contradicted others, especially elders.”

Harry nodded. “In England, that kind of person wouldn’t exactly be popular, but he could function in society. So, that’s the kind of person who becomes a ronin?”

“More or less. Please understand, we make every effort to prevent that from happening. Such people are dealt with very patiently, given many chances to improve their behavior. Family members intercede, many warnings are given. The people who end up as ronin have made a deliberate, conscious choice not to be members of Japanese

wizarding society. It is to our great regret that it ever happens at all, but sometimes it does.”

“So, they didn’t commit a crime, as such. If they did, they’d go to jail. Is that right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I’m wondering... there are wizards in England who think that because they have magical power, they’re better than Muggles. Are there Japanese wizards who think so?”

Sato looked thoughtful. “An interesting question, one which we would not think to ask. I would say that if there are, they keep such opinions to themselves. It would be highly immodest to express the opinion that you are better than someone else, so no one would. Personally, I would say that we are not better than Muggles, just different. Some would say that Muggles have drifted too far from our current societal customs, but that is an issue of culture, not magic.”

I can see where that makes sense, thought Harry. “How do they stop ronin from attacking Muggles? Like, doing what they did to Kaz?”

“I will answer your question, but I would like to make a quick observation first,” said Sato agreeably. “You have now asked several questions about ronin. I do not mind answering them; I understand your interest, as you were attacked by them. But I would recommend that you do not ask other Japanese about them, particularly multiple questions. Your interest might be misunderstood as wishing to focus on the negative aspects of Japan. If someone came to England and asked many questions about injustice and matters which did not reflect well on England...”

Harry shrugged a little. “I wouldn’t care.”

“No, many Westerners would not. Japanese have a stronger-than-average national pride, however, so we do.”

“I understand,” said Harry. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

Sato shook his head. "No, it is all right. I am simply advising you in how to deal with others, especially those who do not understand your culture as I do. As for your question, the Memory Charm is one kind of spell that is detected. If a ronin did magic against a Muggle, news would spread through the Muggle community, and wizards whose job it is to monitor the Muggle community would hear about it. They would then locate the perpetrator and arrest him; he would likely go to prison. It is an imperfect system, but it generally works well enough."

Harry had no further immediate questions; after a pause, Sato spoke again. "Well, then, let us take care of some matters of an official nature that need to be dealt with. There are some forms that you will need to fill out; these are the ones that those who come to Japan in the normal way must. Attached to some of the forms will be an apology form."

"An apology form?" Harry repeated, surprised.

"I know it sounds peculiar to you, but it is standard for us. If one fills out a form late, improperly, or outside the norm in some ways, it is customary to attach what can be called an apology form, recognizing that you did something outside the standard fashion, and apologizing for any inconvenience your actions have caused."

Harry chuckled. "Kaz did say there was a lot of apologizing in Japan. But a form to apologize... it just seems really funny."

"Understandable," said Sato. He reached over to his desk and picked up a stack of parchment that seemed almost an inch high, took one off the top, and handed it to a surprised Harry, who wondered whether he had to fill out all of those forms. "This is the first page of the Cultural Exchange Visitor Application Form..."

* * * * *

With Sato's patient assistance, Harry spent the next few hours filling out forms, occasionally pausing to ask questions about the forms. The paperwork was mind-numbing, relieved only by a lunch break and the occasional occurrence of humor, such as Harry's laughter

when Sato explained that he had to fill out an apology form to apologize for lateness in filling out the apology form which apologized for filling out the forms in Japan rather than the applicant's home country.

Then it was time to go submit the forms. Sato explained that they would have to visit three separate areas: the Foreign Ministry, the Interior Ministry, and the Culture Ministry, whose application forms Harry had found to be the oddest, asking questions which seemed designed to construct a psychological profile of the applicant. Sato had explained that since a foreign person could affect the Japanese culture, the Ministry wanted to know what kind of person they were. Harry thought, but didn't say, that Japanese culture was pretty fragile if it could be affected that easily.

They left Sato's office, and walked down hallways. It was Harry's first time to see the building, and was surprised that it was so big; it seemed like the kind of spacious office complex that he'd seen on Muggle television, and there didn't seem to be more than one floor. "Is this place in Tokyo?" he asked as they walked.

"Yes, it is. Why do you ask?"

"When I was flying over Tokyo, it looked extremely crowded. I can't imagine where you'd find the space for this."

"I can understand why this would surprise you, but we are actually on a very small area of land, greatly enhanced magically. Tokyo has several parks, some of which contain many wizarding homes, unseen by Muggles. We are in a place called 'Kokyo,' which means, the Emperor's Palace. The area, a relatively large one by Tokyo Muggle standards, is used not only for the Magical Ministry, but also it contains what you would consider the equivalent of Diagon Alley."

Harry's eyebrows rose. "You've seen Diagon Alley?"

"Once, very long ago; it would have been before you were born. I visited England, though it was not one of the English-speaking countries I spent time in. I spent a year each in the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand."

As Sato spoke, Harry noticed Japanese wizards passing them, often greeting or nodding at Sato, and sometimes looking at Harry. A few gave him very odd looks, or longish stares. They arrived at the part of the Foreign Ministry where they had to submit the forms, and were told they had to wait; they took seats.

"This all looks very new," Harry observed.

Sato nodded. "This whole complex was built only ten years ago. It caused a great controversy."

"Why? Because of the cost?"

"No," said Sato. "It is because the previous complex had been in existence for over two hundred years, and change does not come easily for us. Because it was so old, as it expanded, it became very disorganized; parts of different ministries were spread all over, very inefficiently. Also, it was much more old-fashioned, with straw—what we call 'tatami'—mats in most offices. Many people liked it that way, or at least were used to it, and did not want to change. The new system is much better, but only recently did some of my seniors cease expressing their displeasure about the change."

"What about your... juniors, I guess, the people younger than you?"

"They would not express displeasure to me, as I am their senior," explained Sato. Duh, I should have thought of that, Harry said to himself. Kaz said something like that.

"Speaking of your seniors... the Foreign Minister, Watanabe-san, wasn't exactly friendly when I talked to him. He seemed to think of me like I was some kind of annoyance, like I'd done something to offend him, but I didn't say much to him, so I can't imagine what it could be. Do you have any idea?"

Sato seemed to look around nervously as they waited, then responded, his voice low. "This is... a question which, if asked of most Japanese, would make them uncomfortable. As a learning exercise, I would like you to think about why that would be."

“Oh. Sorry.” Harry thought for a minute, then answered. “Because if the answer is something like ‘he’s not a nice guy,’ you don’t want to have to say that, because he’s your boss?”

Sato nodded. “Very good. Not exactly correct, but along the right lines. In general, asking anyone to offer an opinion regarding their senior is awkward, especially a question which cannot really be answered without some negative reference. The person asked in this case will tend to avoid the question. The standard conversational tactic here would be to say something like, ‘It could be any number of things. Watanabe-san has been my boss for ten years, and we have a good relationship.’ The first part of the answer is vague and non-responsive, and the second explains the absence of an answer. The person has essentially said to you, ‘why do you ask me this when you know I cannot answer?’ So, if you ask someone a question and the answer is non-responsive, it is a good idea to think about why the person found it difficult to answer.

“Now, to answer your question... in his case, I believe it is mainly because of your age. He probably thinks of you as if you were an errant schoolboy, and finds it difficult to believe that you came to Japan in the way you did. He also may be vaguely insulted that you did not specifically intend to come to Japan, but ended up here anyway. But I feel your age must be the main factor. Someone of his age may tend to speak to someone of your age somewhat... imperiously, as if to emphasize the difference in their status. And... I’m sorry, but this is where my answer must end.” He gave Harry a small smile.

Harry returned the smile. “I understand. Sorry about that, it’s just a little hard for me to get used to.”

“I completely understand. This is the reason for the twenty hours of background cultural materials.”

Harry nodded. “It’s interesting... my school’s headmaster was quite old, much more than Watanabe-san, but he was always kind to me, and treated me with respect. Would that not happen here?”

Sato shrugged a little. "It would be rare, but... would you be referring to Professor Dumbledore?"

Harry's eyebrows went high. "You know him?"

"I met him the same day I saw Diagon Alley, almost thirty years ago. I talked with him for fifteen or twenty minutes, and I found him a most remarkable man. But I believe a man like him is rare, even in your culture?"

Not realizing it, Harry took on a melancholy tone. "Yes, he was. He was a great man, probably a unique man. But I see your point. We can't expect other people to be like him."

"In any case," added Sato, "it would not be impossible for a Japanese man to be such as him. Just quite rare. But, yes, it was an honor to meet him. Did you have the privilege of knowing him well?"

Harry became even more melancholy as images from King's Cross came to his mind. "Yes. Yes, I did."

They sat in silence until called on, after which they stood and submitted their forms to the proper person. Sato answered a few questions from the bureaucrat, and apologized a few times. Listening to the conversation, Harry still couldn't understand the reason for the apologies. Maybe general principle, he thought wryly.

The trip to the Interior Ministry was unremarkable, except that again Harry found himself the recipient of many peculiar looks. They did not have to wait at this stop, and were quickly on their way to the Culture Ministry. As they walked, Harry reflected that it seemed strange even to have a Culture Ministry.

A man who appeared slightly older than Sato approached; Sato bowed a little as they approached each other, though clearly neither intended to stop. "Good day, Kameda-san," said Sato politely.

"Kenichi," replied the other man, more casual than polite. As they passed, he added, "Got the short straw, I see."

Harry couldn't help but turn his head slightly to glance at the other man, then turned again to see Sato's expressionless face. Harry could imagine what was going through Sato's mind, but decided to speak anyway. "That meant what I thought it meant, right?"

"Can we sit for a moment, Harry-san?" asked Sato, his expression just a little different than usual. He motioned them to a sofa that was intended to be used by people waiting for a bureaucrat whose office was currently closed, and they sat.

"I... gather from your expression that you were not offended."

Harry shrugged. "Not especially. Believe me, I've heard much worse. If I got offended every time something like that happened, I'd be crazy by now. And whoever he is, I really don't care what he thinks."

"A very healthy attitude," said Sato. "However, I feel I must—"

"You really don't have to—"

"Apologize on his behalf," Sato continued, to Harry's mild surprise. "He would certainly want to apologize if he knew that he had been understood, so I do so for him. I also apologize on behalf of Japanese people in general, as it is sadly the case that his attitude, while not universal, is hardly unique. This is something I would have gradually explained in the normal course of events had I not been forced to do so now.

"Japan is... a relatively isolated country. Partly because our main islands cannot be reached by Apparition from any other country, but also because we are very protective of our culture. Muggle culture used to be more like ours, until outside influence forced it to change in ways many of their traditionalists regret. Many do not want that to happen to the wizarding world as well. As a result, most of our people are not exposed to outside cultures and influences, and an unfortunate prejudice has built up. Some of our more chauvinistic citizens assume that Japan is superior to other countries in terms of culture, and that foreigners are usually unsophisticated, uncouth, and something to be tolerated only to the extent necessary. It pains me to say this, but it is the truth."

“Well, it’s a little like how some English wizards regard Muggles,” said Harry. “But I don’t feel like I have to apologize for them. It’s their prejudice, not mine.”

Sato’s smile was one of embarrassment. “A very kind, and I suppose, Western attitude. But I do feel I need to apologize for such people, because we Japanese have a much stronger sense of functioning as a group. We think of ourselves as group members first, and individuals second, which is why we have so many customs and laws which you would see as overly restrictive. Our first duty is to not harm the group, and we are taught to consider ourselves somewhat responsible for the behavior of others in the group. The idea is to cause us to realize that others are responsible for our behavior, so we restrain our own behavior.”

“Wow,” said Harry, noting mentally that he seemed to be using the word a lot recently. “I guess that’s in the cultural materials too.”

“More or less,” agreed Sato.

“But one thing that surprises me is that it seemed like it was rude to you, too. I mean, dealing with foreigners is your job, so it’s like you should have to be embarrassed by doing your job.”

Sato seemed impressed that Harry had worked it out. “Yes, that’s right. I admit to being somewhat surprised myself. Kameda-san is... someone who I have never been particularly fond of,” he said, as Harry translated it to ‘I really hate him’ in his mind. “I should also explain that working in the Foreign Ministry is not considered a high-prestige position. Kameda-san and a few others have been known to make little comments about it. The one just now was probably the strongest one I’ve heard him say, and even if you had not understood it, it would be quite rude by Japanese standards. We try to be polite, but not everyone is, especially towards their juniors, which I am to him. He simply does it in a way which is not grievously socially unacceptable.”

Meaning, towards someone who’s lower in rank, with no one around to hear him be rude, thought Harry. What a nice guy. “Well, I think

there are people like that in every country. So, why don't we continue on to the Culture Ministry."

Sato nodded, and they stood. "I really appreciate your understanding attitude."

They started walking. "Nothing I haven't heard before, like I said. No big deal. But I am surprised that you draw straws here."

"What do you mean?"

"Draw straws. You know, to choose someone to do something no one wants to do."

Sato looked confused for a minute, then a light dawned. "Is that how your device translated what he said?" Harry nodded. "Fascinating. What he actually said was that I must have lost the jan-ken-poi, which translates as paper-rock-scissors. Quite impressive; your device substituted the most culturally similar phrase rather than translate it literally, which is what a good translator should do." Harry wasn't surprised; any artifact that Dumbledore saw fit to pass on was bound to be good.

The Culture Ministry turned out to be the hardest stop. The people on duty hadn't heard about Harry's case, and were shocked to hear that they were expected to approve the residence of someone who had not only come to Japan in a totally unauthorized fashion, but also studied none of the cultural background materials. In what seemed to Harry to be a long, circuitous discussion, Sato repeatedly assured the department's workers that this was all approved, and that he would be personally responsible for Harry's cultural education. After twenty minutes it was still not settled; Sato asked Harry to wait outside while he went into the office of the senior person on duty at the time.

Harry found that his newly enhanced hearing enabled him to, with a little concentration, follow what was being said in the office. He heard Sato say that the Minister of Magic himself had approved Harry's stay in Japan, and the bureaucrat should talk to the Minister's office to confirm it. The officer said he would, but that did not remove his personal obligation to carefully monitor all such cases, especially

such an irregular one as this. Sato said he understood, and appealed again for the man to contact a higher authority. After a few more minutes of tedious discussion, Harry got tired of listening, and focused on his own thoughts.

Thirty minutes later, Sato finally left the room, clutching a handful of forms. "Harry-san, are you ready to go?"

Harry grinned. "You're joking, right?" He stood, and they headed off, Harry following. "What was all that about, anyway? It was pretty fast at the other places."

"The delay," explained Sato, "was, I believe, their way of expressing their displeasure over how your case was handled. They had not been told of your situation, which was their Minister's way of expressing his displeasure."

Harry frowned. "Didn't they get the Culture Minister's permission before doing this?"

"Yes, they did. I do not know for certain, but am reasonably sure that he was unhappy with the situation. Bureaucrats do not like to be rushed, and since you are here, decisions had to be made expeditiously; keeping you in confinement while bureaucrats dragged their heels—or, as the Americans liked to say, took their own sweet time—was not viewed as a diplomatically astute option. So, the Minister took quick action. The Interior Ministry did not care so much; their approval is needed, but you are obviously not any kind of threat to internal security. But the Culture Ministry guards its prerogatives rather jealously. So, while the Minister of Culture may have given his grudging assent at the request of the Minister of Magic, he expressed his displeasure by not telling his subordinates about the situation while making himself unavailable, knowing the difficulty this would cause us."

Harry shook his head in wonderment. "You know, it's funny... I've seen all kinds of cultural differences since I got here, but this situation is one I could really see happening in England, the same way. My friend's father, who worked at England's Ministry, told a few stories

that sounded a lot like this. Infighting, people blocking what other people are trying to do in exchange for favors...”

“Indeed, it was made clear to me that a debt was owed by my department to their department. I do not believe they care so much about that; rather, they ask it on principle.”

Harry chuckled. “Well, it wasn’t as though you dragged me to Japan and made them accept me. I’m just a problem that you had to deal with. You’d think they’d understand that.”

“Well, first let me make clear that I am pleased to have you here, and am looking forward to having you stay with us. But to address your comment, their preference would have been to simply have you deported, and if you wished to come, to do so through the normal channels. The Foreign Ministry preferred not to do so, and the Minister of Magic chose what we wished rather than what they wished. So, yes, infighting would be a reasonably good description of the situation.”

“I feel like apologizing for all the trouble, but I suppose that’s what all the forms were about,” Harry half-joked.

“Exactly. I made sure that apology forms were included in every possible place they could be. Partly as recognition of the highly unusual circumstances, and partly to make sure they could not complain that any form was lacking.”

They had arrived back at Sato’s office; Sato began to file away the completed forms. “Do you mind if I ask a question?” asked Harry.

“You may be asking many dozens of questions while you are here,” replied Sato with understated humor. “I do not mind at all. Please go ahead.”

“I noticed I was getting funny looks in the hallways. Is that because everyone knows my situation, or because I’m not Japanese?”

“It is the latter, I’m afraid. Most of the Ministry would not know or care about your situation, but a Westerner walking the halls of the Ministry is a rare sight, and someone of your age doing so is even rarer.”

“I was going to say that a Japanese walking down the halls of our Ministry might get attention, but maybe he wouldn’t, now that I think about it. Some British people look Asian, so the person might work there.”

“Yes, and the same is true in all of the English-speaking countries,” agreed Sato. “Japan is not an ethnically diverse country. So unfortunately, at least until people get used to your presence, there may be a certain amount of staring.”

Harry chuckled. “I’m used to that, anyway.” Sato gave him a quizzical look, but didn’t inquire further.

* * * * *

Soon thereafter, they took a Portkey to Sato’s home. They arrived in a small nook near what appeared to be the living room; an area large enough for two people to stand comfortably seemed to have been carved out of the living room wall. Clever idea, thought Harry; a specific Portkey arrival site. Wonder why we don’t have that. Oh, yeah, Portkeys aren’t allowed most of the time. But this is a good idea.

Sato stepped out of the arrival nook and loudly said “Tadaima,” translated for Harry as “I’m home” by his artifact. The female-sounding reply of “Okaeri,” which sounded familiar now that he thought about it, went untranslated as it had at Kaz’s place. Harry stepped out a pace behind his host.

A woman briskly walked into the room. She was more than half a head shorter than Harry, with a conservative shoulder-length hairstyle. Looking to be in her late forties or early fifties, she was fairly attractive for her age. “Harry, this is my wife Sawako,” said Sato. Turning to his wife, he said in Japanese, “This is Harry Potter, from England.”

“Pleased to meet you,” she said through the translator; Sato had already explained that his wife knew no English. She bowed deeply.

“Nice to meet you, too,” Harry said politely, bowing as he’d seen Japanese do many times by then.

“Please allow us to show you the house,” she said. “This is the living room, of course.” The room was fairly large, a bit larger than the living room at Grimmauld Place. There was a tasteful beige rug covering most of the floor, a wide table that was about the height of a coffee table that was clearly intended for people to sit in front of while sitting on the floor, and there was also a sofa and two chairs near one of the walls. There was artwork on two of the walls, and one had an indentation in the wall that housed what looked to Harry like a small shrine; the shrine was about three feet wide and two feet tall, with detailed crafting. It looked as though dozens of man-hours had been spent just on the detail work. Harry wondered if every family in Japan had one.

Sato gestured at it; Harry wondered if Sato had seen him looking at it, or if it was just because it was the most striking object in the living room. “This is our family’s shrine. All Japanese families have one; we use it to talk to the spirits of our departed ancestors.”

Harry nodded, but said nothing. There were some things he was curious about, but wanted to be careful about asking questions that he couldn’t know might be offensive. He would wait until he learned more of the culture, or ask Sato directly without anyone else around.

They went into the kitchen, which was also surprisingly spacious, with a lot of counter space. An old woman was chopping vegetables, apparently not with the use of magic. “Harry-san, this is my mother, Maeko,” said Sato as the woman stopped her work and bowed. “In Japan, we call the women of her age ‘obaa-san,’ which can mean ‘grandmother’ or ‘honored elderly lady.’ You can address her in this way as well. Obaa-san, this is Harry Potter, from England.”

Harry bowed again. “Nice to meet you, obaa-san.”

She bowed and smiled; she looked about eighty, but didn’t seem stooped or frail. “Nice to meet you. I am sure my son will do a good job looking after you.”

Harry nodded. "He has already." He almost added that Sato hadn't had an easy time at the Ministry, but realized that if he said it, Sato would have to explain, and his wife and mother might be embarrassed on his behalf. Maybe the less said the better here, he thought.

They passed through a Western-style room with a large table; Sato explained that this was the dining room, but that they often ate at the table in the living room while sitting on the floor. "One represents the old ways, and one, the new ways; we like to do both," said Sato.

They passed a room off to the side of the house that was very bare, with only six of the straw mats that Harry had seen in confinement covering the floor. "The mats you see on the floor are called tatami, as I mentioned at the Ministry," said Sato. "It is a very traditional flooring material, and was the flooring of choice in Japan for centuries. Most new homes have adopted hard floors, but most homes also have at least one such room, partly to remind us not to forget the past. For us, it serves as a meditation room. If we feel stressed, or want to get away from things and experience a quiet time, we go to this room. When the door is closed, it is well soundproofed. The door is only closed when the room is occupied, and when we finish, we leave the door open."

"It looks very peaceful," observed Harry. It also reminded him strongly of the confinement room, but decided to keep that observation to himself.

The next rooms passed were the bedrooms of the Satos' two children, followed by a mostly empty room, again surprisingly large. There was a desk and chair, a thick rug on the floor, and a sliding-door closet made of paper that had a very pretty flower design. "This is the guest room, and so is the room you will be staying in," said Sato. "There is no bed, but there are futons and bedding in the closet."

Harry nodded. "Thank you very much," he said, because he felt as though he should, and couldn't think of anything else to say.

“Oh, not at all,” said a smiling Mrs. Sato. “We hope you will enjoy staying here.”

The tour concluded with the study, which contained several bookshelves, and a few racks that contained scrolls, such as Harry had seen at the Ministry. Sato pointed to a shelf that contained several dozen English books, encouraging Harry to read any he felt like.

Harry was about to thank him again when two shouts of ‘I’m home’ were heard from the living room; Mrs. Sato went scurrying out of the room while she gave the standard reply. Harry took the opportunity to ask Sato, “Why doesn’t my artifact translate that word you say when people come home?”

“‘Tadaima’ can be reasonably translated as ‘I’m home,’ because people in Western countries do say that upon returning home,” explained Sato. “But ‘okaeri,’ which is a greeting in answer to the one who has returned home, has no real translation because there is nothing in particular Westerners say in this situation. They may say ‘hello’ or another greeting, but nothing specific for the person who has returned. So, your translator leaves it blank, which is probably the best choice for this situation.”

“Interesting,” said Harry.

Sato nodded. “Yes, I think so too. There may be times when I ask you how the device translated something. I have seen translation artifacts, but yours seems particularly good.”

Mrs. Sato returned to the room, followed by the Satos’ two children, who Sato introduced. “Harry, this is my son Yasunori, and my daughter Masako. Their ages are eighteen and nineteen.” Motioning to Harry, Sato said, “This is Harry Potter. He is from England, and he’ll be staying with us for a while.”

“Nice to meet you,” they said in unison, bowing.

“Nice to meet you,” he responded, trying to imitate their bows. Yasunori was only a few inches shorter than Harry, and taller than his

father; he was thin, with slightly narrow eyes and a weak chin. Masako was much shorter, five or six inches shorter than her brother. She had round cheeks and more Western eyes; Harry felt she wouldn't be considered pretty, but perhaps 'cute' would be suitable.

Sato nodded to his wife, who ushered the children out of the room, and followed them. "Perhaps you would like to look around the room, or look in the study at the books I mentioned. I need to take care of something, but I should not be too long."

"Of course," responded Harry; Sato nodded, and left the room, closing the door behind him. A half a minute later, Harry 'saw' a magical field go up; it was strange, because he knew it was being put up in another room. It wasn't that he could see through the wall, but it was as though the magic was bright enough to shine through the material blocking the ordinary view.

He immediately realized what it was; it had to be a spell that kept anyone outside from hearing. He suddenly became acutely interested in what was being said, and quickly debated what to do. He could use the Elder Wand to break the field's effectiveness, but he hesitated. If they somehow knew he did it, it could cause a fair amount of trouble, and Sato had been nothing but kind to him. On the other hand, what would he be saying that was such a secret? It had to be about him. Deciding quickly, he used his wand to breach the field, and his improved hearing took him the rest of the way. He picked up the conversation near what seemed like the beginning.

"...to make sure everyone understands the situation, so any problems can be avoided. I have told you before that Westerners have a different style of social interaction than we do. He will naturally want to ask questions about us, and about Japan, and we should not discourage him. Because of his lack of understanding of our country, some of his questions may seem to us to be inappropriate, or offensive. Keep in mind that he does not mean them to be so. Answer as best you can, and if you cannot do so politely, just avoid the question. I have already explained to him that Japanese will tend to avoid questions we find too uncomfortable to answer. Never assume he has a negative motivation for any question or comment he might make. At the same time, you would do best not to adopt his style of

questions or comments. Always keep in mind that you are Japanese, and act accordingly. Deal with him with the politeness and cultural awareness you would if he were Japanese. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” the two teenagers chorused.

“There is one other thing,” Sato went on, “that you should be aware of, but not tell anyone else. He is a famous person in his home country, and has been since a very young age; I have long been aware of him by following the English media. He is very modest, however, and would prefer not to be famous. He unknowingly came to Japan in an unauthorized way, on a Muggle aircraft. He was apprehended and held for a day; in that time, he did not attempt to use his name or his influence in his country to get better treatment, even though he easily could have. We contacted his home country; they did not know where he was. Made aware of the situation, his country’s Minister of Magic quickly became personally involved, strongly imploring us to treat Potter-san as we would a highly honored dignitary, and expressing that doing so would be a deep favor both to him and to England.”

“Wow,” said a young male voice; must be the son, thought Harry. “Why is he so famous and honored?”

“He was famous from childhood due to events that he was unknowingly involved in; explaining them would take too long. But recently, he was involved in events concerning resistance to a Dark wizard who had taken control of England. He and his friends resisted this wizard, at great personal risk. Near the end of the struggle—I was shown a memory. He faced the wizard, knowing that it would mean his death, because it was necessary for the survival of his people. Through a quirk of fate, he survived, and went on to defeat the wizard who had subjugated his people. The memory I saw... was the most remarkable thing I have ever seen. Facing certain death, surrounded by his enemies, he did not flinch, did not waver. If all Japanese people knew this, he would be as honored here as he is in his country.”

“But then, why must we not tell anyone?” asked the son.

“Because he wants to be treated as a normal person is treated. I have spent hours with him, and he has not brought up the topic, has acted as if there were nothing special about him.”

“Well, that is what a person should do,” said Sato’s wife.

“In our country, yes, but not in his. In his, his actions show highly unusual modesty. In any case, I tell you this because since he will be living with us, you should know why it is important to treat him with respect. But you must not even hint to another person that there is anything unusual or special about him.”

The son spoke again. “I understand, Father, but... since foreigners are not well understood, some people may treat him with less respect than they should.”

“It has already occurred, at the Ministry. He was remarkably sanguine about it. I apologized and explained the reason, and I believe he understands. Also, Westerners are more expressive and frank, so he is not as easily offended as we would be. But he deserves to see what our country is like, both the good and the bad. We must never be so arrogant as to imagine that there is nothing about our country that could be improved. It may be instructive to see Japan through his eyes.

“Another reason I tell you this is to urge you to be careful regarding what questions you ask him. I believe he would want you to feel free to ask questions about his country or his culture, but he has had more than his share of personal heartaches and tragedies. He has lost people he cared about, and endured great hardship. So, even innocent questions related to personal matters may be difficult for him to answer without explaining details that he may not wish to fully explain.”

The children acknowledged their father’s words, and left the room. Harry guessed that only Sato and his wife were now in the room. “They may be afraid to ask him anything now,” said his wife.

“I know. But for now I would rather err in that direction than the other one. When we were talking, I referred to his school’s late headmaster,

and the change in his mood was obvious. He and the headmaster were clearly close, which I had not known. If I can make a mistake so easily, so can they."

"Has he really been through so much? Did you overstate it a little, for their benefit?"

"You may not believe this, but I understated it. He has been through far too much for someone of his age. It is easy for me to understand why he wanted to get out of his country."

"Oh, dear," said Sawako, sympathy evident in her tone. "What will he do while he is here?"

"I'm not sure. I was thinking of the summer session of Yasunori's school. I'll try to set up a meeting with the headmaster of the school tomorrow, and see if they will accept him as a visiting student. It would be good for him to learn how we do magic."

"What if Harry-san doesn't want to do that?"

"Then he won't. I don't intend to push him into doing anything. I will suggest it, but if he has other ideas, that will be fine."

"I should go and help obaa-san with dinner preparations." After that, Harry heard no further conversation.

He leaned back in the chair, careful not to lean back too far. Well, he thought, Sato knows about me. I suppose I should have guessed that; all he has to do is read the Prophet, which if he's in charge of relations with English-speaking countries, he'd do occasionally. At least now I know for sure that he means well, even if he's a little too careful. It's not like I'm going to break down if someone asks me about my family. But I suppose he doesn't want to assume that.

Funny how Kingsley didn't ask for me back, and went as far as he did on my behalf. He must know he's got a lot to make up to me, not that what he did even comes close to starting. And how the hell did he get that memory he showed Sato? Narcissa Malfoy? One of the other

Death Eaters there, after being captured? Weird. Not that I care, of course.

Such thoughts occupied him until he heard a knock on his door. He got up to answer, and it was Sato, offering to take him on a tour of the backyard, which turned out to have a small garden. Harry asked how they could have so much space; Sato explained that the space of the home was magically enhanced, and the garden was because they were far enough from Tokyo that space was not a major issue. They took Portkeys to most places they needed to go; Harry gathered that permanent Portkeys were the equivalent of fireplaces here. "Fireplaces never really caught on here," explained Sato, "as this country is prone to earthquakes, and special attention must always be paid to fires. Deadly fires have started in the Muggle world after earthquakes." Harry wondered if he would be staying around long enough to experience an earthquake.

They went back inside, into the living room, where Yasunori was pointing his wand at a circle on the wall that had concentric circles, not unlike targets Harry had seen for Muggles practicing with guns. Yasunori's target was about twenty feet away, and Harry saw the energy shoot from Yasunori's wand and hit the target, causing a two-second indentation in the third circle from the center on the right side. He wondered why it made an indentation, then realized quickly that most people didn't see spells, so without it, there would be no way to see how well he had done.

"How much do you—" Harry asked Yasunori, intending to finish with the words 'practice that,' but Sato quickly made a subtle gesture to indicate that Yasunori's concentration shouldn't be disturbed. Harry was quiet as Yasunori took five more practice shots, concentrating intently, his best shot hitting the ring next to the center.

Yasunori put down his wand, clearly finished. "Sorry about that," said Harry.

"It's okay."

"We don't do target practice like that. How often do you practice?"

“About a half hour a day, if I’m not too busy. Would you like to try?”

“Sure.” Harry walked over to where Yasunori was standing. “What spell do you use?”

“Do you know the ‘neutral’ spell?”

“Oh, okay. We call it the test spell. It’s just impact, it doesn’t do anything. Oh, by the way... I got picked up by your Aurors for using a Stunning spell in self-defense. Before I make any more mistakes, can you tell me what spells are illegal?”

Sato answered; Harry registered that Sato was now speaking Japanese, so as not to exclude his son from the conversation. “Illegal spells are ones that are meant to cause pain, to render a person unconscious, of course to kill or injure, to change one’s own or another’s bodily form, and to change another’s experience of consciousness.”

Harry was initially confused by the last one, but soon realized it covered things like Confundus curses and Memory Charms. “And the government’s magic detectors will detect anyone doing any of those spells.” Sato nodded. “But it’s legal to use a spell to immobilize someone.”

“It is considered a self-defense spell, but yes, it is legal,” answered Sato.

“But there was something I saw when I first got here...” Harry explained how he had found Kaz, without mentioning Kaz’s name, or that he had seen the magic. “He seemed to be in pain, and they were doing something to him. But if it’s illegal to do spells to cause pain, then what were they doing?”

Sato looked uncomfortable. “Normally, a Japanese person asked this question would simply respond ‘I don’t know’ and leave it at that, that answer being the literal truth, because the answer is somewhat embarrassing to us as a country. But I am almost certain that I know.

“There is a spell that causes an acute itching sensation; this spell is not illegal. One method of harassing a person here that is not uncommon is to first immobilize the victim with a freezing spell, then use the itching spell. The victim will be in strong discomfort, unable to do anything to relieve it. The more people administering the spell, the more acute the discomfort.”

Harry was surprised. “And this is legal?”

“Thus, the embarrassment,” said Sato. “It should not be. It is, sadly, sometimes used with the tacit consent of those higher in the hierarchy, as a means of enforcement of social conformity.”

Ah, thought Harry. “You mean, bullying.”

Sato seemed to cringe ever so slightly. “We generally try to avoid using such stark terms... but you are not incorrect. For your future reference, however, outside this house it is better to avoid using such direct words. I know in your country you are accustomed to calling things what they are, but for us, such words are often not socially acceptable, and can cause ill feeling.”

“So... if something is unpleasant, you don’t call it exactly what it is, so nobody has to feel too bad.” I bet the people who this is done to don’t have any problem calling it what it is, he thought.

“Yes, that’s right. There are similar things in your culture, of course.” Switching to English for a few words, he went on, “When someone has died, for example, you often do not say he died, but that he ‘passed away,’ or another such phrase. Bodily functions are often referred to euphemistically. We Japanese simply use euphemisms more often, reflecting the indirectness of our culture.”

“Probably sometimes I won’t know what you’re talking about, if you use too many euphemisms,” joked Harry.

“Until a few years ago,” said Yasunori, “sometimes I could not follow adult conversations for that reason. It can be difficult.”

“In some situations,” added Sato, “it is seen as a conversational art form to speak as indirectly as possible. It is thought to show nuance and sophistication.”

Something clicked for Harry. “And that’s why you think—sorry, some Japanese think that foreigners are unsophisticated. Because we just say things directly.”

“Yes, exactly,” said Sato. “Those who understand foreign cultures know this is not so, that it is simply a cultural difference, and that there are no fewer sophisticated Westerners than Japanese.” After a slight pause, Sato gestured to the target across the room.

“Oh, yeah,” said Harry, having gotten caught up in the conversation. Concentrating, he fired the test spell, and saw it zoom from his wand and hit the target three rings below the bullseye. Annoyed, he tilted the wand up incrementally, and fired again; this time, it was one ring from the bullseye. The next shot hit the bullseye.

“That’s good,” said Yasunori cautiously, “but when you practice this, you’re not supposed to hold it in place and move it a little, like you did. Otherwise...”

“It would be too easy,” said Harry, saying what he supposed Yasunori didn’t want to say directly, lest it sound like an insult. “Yeah, okay.” Putting the wand down, he raised it again, aimed, and took a shot; three rings to the left. Four more shots yielded no better results. Discouraged, Harry put his hands on his hips.

“You don’t usually practice this,” said Yasunori encouragingly. “It’s not bad for a first try.”

Harry shook his head. “I know my aim is better than this. I have to figure out what I’m doing wrong.”

There was silence as Harry thought. “Could it have to do with the fact that you are shooting at a target, which you are not used to doing?” suggested Sato.

Harry suddenly remembered something his father had said, then winced mentally at the memory; he had managed not to think about losing his parents for the past half hour. "Yes, thanks, that's it. Let me try again."

He focused on the bullseye, now imagining it not as a target, but as Voldemort's wand hand, from which he had to remove the wand. Holding the image in his mind, he closed his eyes, and quickly brought up his wand and fired. Operating on automatic, he did it nine more times, then opened his eyes to see father and son exchanging very impressed looks. "How did I do?"

"Three bullseyes, five first ring, two second ring," said Yasunori. "That's better than any ten I've ever done in a row. How did you do that?"

"Something my father taught me," answered Harry, trying to keep emotion out of his voice. "He said that you'll mess yourself up by thinking too much. The best thing to do is not think about it, just trust your body and your... unconscious, I guess, to do what you know it can do."

"Well," said Sato slowly, "we do not have this concept, but it is hard to argue with the results we just saw. Do they teach this at Hogwarts?"

Harry shook his head. "No. Just my father." He again fought back a wave of emotion. "At Hogwarts, we didn't do any kind of target practice at all, we just focused on learning spells. Also, there wasn't particular practice for doing spells from this kind of distance."

"In that case, I'm surprised you did this so well," said Yasunori.

Harry chuckled darkly. "Real-life practice. But maybe Hogwarts should teach this."

"Well, Harry-san, keep in mind that Yasunori is attending a special three-year school that focuses on advanced magical and tactical training. At this school, those who are at the top of the class are considered for Auror training. We have a school, which Yasunori just recently finished, that is the equivalent of Hogwarts."

“Are you going to try to become an Auror?” asked Harry.

“I would like to,” replied Yasunori. “But it’s quite difficult. Only the top ten percent are even considered. But the school’s whole purpose is not to make Aurors. The summer session is tactical, but the rest of the year is devoted to other magical disciplines. How about you? What job do you want to get?”

Harry almost chuckled. The most prestigious job in England is waiting for me, I just don’t want it. “I haven’t decided. A... a lot of stuff has happened recently, and I just need to let some time pass. I have a feeling the answer will come to me.” He looked at Sato and his son, and added, “I suppose that’s not the kind of thing a Japanese would say. There would be a career plan, a specific path and goal, and it would be approved by an elder. Am I right?”

“Exactly,” agreed Sato. “But perhaps ‘approved’ is too strong a word. ‘Advised’ would be more appropriate.”

“But is it the case that ‘advised’ is the euphemism for ‘approved?’”

Sato gave him a small smile. “Sometimes, no. Sometimes, yes.”

Harry smiled. He’d heard Asians described as ‘inscrutable’ before, but hadn’t understood why. Now, he felt he knew.

* * * * *

Dinner was a quiet affair, with somewhat less conversation than Harry was sure happened when any six English people sat at a table together. Most surprising was that nobody seemed to interrupt anyone else. Once Harry interrupted Sawako, and quickly apologized; he was careful not to do it again, but it was hard to change one’s habits.

He learned more about the family. Sawako’s hobbies were horticulture and calligraphy; she had taken an advanced course in the use of magic to aid in the growing of various plants. Masako was attending a three-year school which seemed to be the equivalent of a

finishing school; the emphasis was on home economics. Realizing that he'd seen few women at the Ministry, he asked about what women did in Japanese society; Sawako explained that there were rather few 'career women,' and the few that existed were seen uncharitably. The married ones were seen as neglecting their husbands, and the single ones were thought unable to get husbands. Pretty conservative, thought Harry, but he knew not to expect anything else from this society. He spent a little time telling them about what career women did in England, much to Sawako and Masako's interest. Maeko, however, clearly if understatedly disdained such an idea. "Who takes care of their husbands?" she asked. Harry explained that plenty of husbands could take care of themselves, and that in fact, England's Minister of Magic was a bachelor who could cook quite well. Before his mother could respond, Sato intervened with a mild comment about how each system worked well for each country; Harry wondered if it was common that if a dispute seemed in the offing, a third party tried to derail the discussion.

After dinner, Yasunori and Masako retired to their rooms to study. Harry talked with Sato a little more about Japanese culture, and Sato asked Harry about joining Yasunori's class. Harry had decided to do it; after all, what was he going to do during the day anyway? He agreed, but asked Sato if he would personally teach him about some basics of Japanese magic; Sato cheerfully agreed, and they talked about it for the next hour. Before bed, Sato showed Harry some of the English-language books in the study, and gave some recommendations. Harry took a few, said goodnight, and went to his bedroom. He read a little, but didn't take long to fall asleep.

* * * * *

In his dream, he was visiting his parents.

He didn't know where he lived, or why he couldn't spend much more time with them. But in the dream, it seemed to make sense.

They had been on a picnic, they had had a big dinner together, they had stayed up late talking. Other people were unimportant, peripheral characters in the dream. Just him and his parents.

But as so often happened in dreams, the time was over, and he had to go back to wherever he'd come from; he had to part from them. He hugged his mother and tried not to cry, saying he didn't want to go. His father patted him on the back and said, "I'm sorry we have to go. We weren't supposed to come this time, but we had to see you one more time. Just remember the time we had."

His father hugged him. Harry clung desperately, intending never to let go, so he wouldn't have to say goodbye. But his parents became insubstantial, and he was hugging thin air. He woke up, and his first thought was to hold back the tears as the last six words his father had spoken echoed in his head.

The day was a slow one for Harry, which suited him fine. Sato and his two children were at work and school; Sawako and Maeko kept busy around the house, several times solicitously asking Harry if he was all right or offering him something to eat or drink. Sawako explained what kind of food Japanese ate, and asked Harry about English food. He read the books Sato had recommended the night before, walked around the backyard looking at everything, and had a go at meditating in the special room. It didn't work too well, however, as thoughts of his parents kept intruding whenever he tried to clear his mind. In general, though, his surroundings were sufficiently new and different that they kept his mind off of what he didn't want to think about. Just remember the time we had, his father had said. He wanted to, but it was too painful.

At about four o'clock, he heard the shout of 'I'm home' come from Masako, then an hour later from Yasunori. Interesting custom, he thought. You definitely always know who's home this way. Harry stayed in his room reading, though, not wanting to bother them, or make them feel they had to pay attention to the guest.

Sato came home a little after six, and dinner was ready by 6:45. Harry wondered if dinner was chosen with him in mind: it was, he was told, called shabu-shabu, a dish in which thin slices of beef were cooked by dipping them into a small pot of boiling water at the table and lightly seasoned with a soy sauce-based mixture, eaten with rice and vegetables. He found it quite good, and asked about how often Japanese ate such dishes, especially those with beef. To the surprise

of everyone but Sato, he related that some Westerners were vegetarians, and was told that almost no Japanese were. "If people were strict about it, it might cause problems for others, such as those who ate with them, or cooked for them," pointed out Maeko. Harry thought, but didn't say, that it seemed very typically Japanese to worry about how the different actions of one person affected the others, even if the effect on them was less than the effect on himself.

"Oh, Harry-san," said Sato near the end of the meal, "on Sunday, three days from today, our family will be attending a service for my late father."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," said Harry, hoping he hadn't joined the family at a bad time. "When did he pass away?"

"Sunday will be the third anniversary of his passing." To Harry's confused expression, Sato went on, "Yes, you do not really have this custom. When someone in the family passes away, it is our custom to make such a visit to their gravesite every year on the anniversary, for the first ten years after their death. After that, we go every five years. We wish you could accompany us, but unfortunately, it is considered inappropriate for anyone but family to attend."

Ah, I see, he's apologizing for leaving me behind. "Of course, I understand. Thanks for letting me know about it; I'm sure I can keep myself busy. But I'm wondering, you said you used the shrine in the living room to talk to your ancestors' spirits. Is visiting the gravesite a different thing?"

"Yes, it is," said Sato. "We visit the gravesite specifically to show respect for his memory, not to talk to his spirit. The shrine in the living room is there so that we can talk to his spirit, and those of our ancestors."

"Now, when you say, talk to their spirits," asked Harry, trying to be careful not to accidentally say anything offensive, "do you mean, just talk, or do you mean, have a conversation?"

"The latter. When I use the word 'spirit,' I mean what you might call a 'ghost.' If we summon them respectfully, they may appear, and we

can talk to them, or ask them a question. Our society considers this a valuable resource, so that we can draw on the wisdom of the elders.”

The last four words sounded to Harry like a slightly pompous phrase; except for Dumbledore, he hadn’t met that many older or dead people who he considered to have any wisdom. He wondered if Sato really believed that, or if he was reciting the standard Japanese attitude about such things.

“Interesting,” he said. “But this only works if they decided to stay around as ghosts, right? Or can you talk to them even if they’ve already gone on, to the next place?”

“Ah, yes,” said Sato, nodding. “Westerners are always surprised to hear what I am about to tell you. Everyone who passes away in Japan remains behind as a ghost.”

Harry’s eyes went wide. “Every single person?”

“Yes. They stay for three generations. When the last of their great-grandchildren has passed on, they move on to what awaits beyond this life.”

“But... a friend recently came back as a ghost, and he said that it was hard to come back as a ghost, that it was much easier to just move on. How is it that everyone resists that urge, and comes back as a ghost?”

“We are taught that it is part of our generational responsibility. If someone should pass on before reaching twenty, the age of adulthood, they are expected to move on. If it is between twenty and forty, and the deceased had no children, then it is up to them. But in other cases, we are expected to stay.”

Sawako entered the conversation. “It is not unheard of for someone who is expected to stay to move on, but that usually happens only if the person had severe emotional problems, or was clearly unsuited to help others on the physical plane. In your country, people do not stay?”

Harry explained what he'd been told about ghosts, concluding with, "So, from what I've heard, staying as a ghost isn't exactly a good thing; it means you had some problem. So, I was surprised at what you told me."

Sato nodded. "I understand. But I was told by some Americans who had lost their relatives, or someone close to them, that they wished that the deceased were still around, even if it was as ghosts."

Harry wondered if Sato would have asked him if he wished for that, if Sato weren't trying to stay away from such topics. "But isn't staying around as a ghost kind of unpleasant, or depressing?"

"I believe they do not find it so," said Sato. "But I will admit that I have never asked that particular question. It would seem... inappropriate."

Lots of things in this country are inappropriate, thought Harry. "Well, it's interesting. How often do you talk to them?"

"At least once a year, to all ancestors in our family's direct line."

"But I don't know what you'd... I mean, from what I've heard, there are pretty specific ways you're supposed to act in various situations. Respecting anyone older than you, doing things a particular way, like that... so, it seems like you wouldn't need to ask too much. So, when you summon them, is there really anything to ask them about?"

Sato and his wife exchanged a look; it might have been one of discomfort, but Harry wasn't sure. "There is usually something to talk about," said Sato. "We want our elders to know that their advice is valued."

Strange answer, thought Harry. Kind of vague, and... oh, yeah, he already mentioned this. Non-responsive answer, then a comment that's kind of off the topic... he said that's what they do when they get an uncomfortable question. Maybe some people do think there's nothing to talk about.

Yasunori spoke up. "And there's the Festival of the Departed. That's always nice."

Sato looked at his son, as if expecting him to continue with an explanation, but Yasunori didn't, so Sato did. "It's our second biggest holiday of the year, after the New Year's celebration. Western countries have no equivalent. The whole purpose is to celebrate and honor those who have gone before us. There are dances, performances, great decorations, and the honored ancestors participate, every single one. I do not know the number, but I'm sure it's upwards of 50,000. It is quite a sight."

"What do the ghosts do?" asked Harry, intrigued.

"It is something different every year," said Sato. "I have seen many remarkable displays. For example, one year, the spirits flew in thickly concentrated groups, forming amazing images in the air. Fifty thousand spirits, forming the image of a tree or a chrysanthemum, or forming a message in Chinese characters, each character twenty meters tall."

"We never cease to strive for strength of character," recited Sawako.

"That was the message they spelled out," explained Sato. "That was, I believe, ten years ago."

"Eight," his son corrected him. "I remember that I was ten. Those were some of the Chinese characters I was learning at the time, so I remember it pretty well." Harry felt the message was a little bland and overly moralistic, but decided to keep the observation to himself.

"In fact," said Sato, "I believe now would be a good time to call on them. Let's adjourn to the living room."

Everyone stood; Sawako started to clear the table. "Oh, don't bother," said Maeko. "You go with them, I'll take care of this." Sawako bowed and thanked her mother-in-law, and they went to the living room. Sawako pointed her wand at the wall that Yasunori had been standing next to when doing target practice; a closet opened, and she took out five wide, thick, square cushions, and placed them on the floor. One was directly in front of the shrine; the other four were behind it in two rows of two. Harry was gestured to the one on the left

behind Sato, who took the front cushion. Sawako was beside Harry, and the children behind him. "You should sit like this," said Sawako, gesturing to herself as an example. He tried to do as she was doing—the front of his lower legs flat against the cushion, knees forward, all pressure from his body on the lower legs. It was very awkward, but he managed. I won't be able to keep this up for long, he thought. My legs'll fall asleep.

She smiled a little as she seemed to read his mind. "This style is called 'seiza,' and I would guess there is no equivalent in English. Even some Japanese have trouble with it, for long periods of time. Just do your best, and if you have to change position, go ahead and do so." He nodded and caught an amused glance from Yasunori behind and to his right; Yasunori seemed to be saying without words that he would not be permitted to change position no matter how uncomfortable it became.

Sato opened a drawer under the shrine and pulled out two long, thin sticks and placed them into holders on either side of the shrine pointed toward each other at forty-five degree angles, so the sticks formed a cross, like a large X. He then used his wands to light the end of each; an odd smell soon emanated from the sticks. Ah, incense, Harry thought. He'd heard of it, but never seen it.

Sato then pointed his wand at the shrine and spoke a few words in a low chant; Harry's device didn't translate it. More normally, but still in a ceremonial style, he went on, "Great-grandfather Takehiko-sama, your great-grandson Kenichi humbly requests your presence and guidance." A green beam was now coming from Sato's wand, still pointed at the shrine.

A few seconds later, a ghost appeared, seeming to travel through the shrine, and hovered in front of Sato, who bowed deeply, followed by the other Satos, and finally, belatedly, Harry. "Following the Links of Antiquity, your great-grandfather appears in answer to your call," intoned the ghost. Harry felt that the phrase must be a standard, ceremonial one, based on how the ghost said it. Harry got the sense of self-importance, but wondered if it was just due to cultural differences.

“Our deepest appreciation greets your presence,” said Sato, bowing again. “I would like to introduce to you a new arrival to our humble home. His name is Harry Potter, and he visits us from England.” The ghost bowed slightly; Harry did the same. The ghost looked at him suspiciously; Harry wondered if he was supposed to bow lower, but decided not to do it again.

Sato turned to Harry. “Our custom is to ask the spirits of the honored ancestors about matters which concern us greatly, matters which have been on our mind and we perhaps have difficulty resolving. If you would like to ask a question of the honored ancestor, you should feel free to do so.”

Harry nodded his acknowledgment. Sato had laid out rather specifically the type of question he should ask, and therefore, what he should not ask. Okay, well, I'll give it a try, he thought. Taking a moment to think, thinking about Death Eaters—especially the one who had spat at McGonagall—he asked, “Do you think we should try to take revenge on those who have seriously wronged us?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sawako give him a slightly surprised look, but only for a second. The ghost himself seemed taken aback, as if unprepared to answer such a question. After a small hesitation, he answered, “All things in moderation,” with an emphatic tone that seemed to Harry to belie the fact that he had not come close to answering the question.

Harry decided to have another go at it. “Can there ever be any justification for oppressing or dominating another group or race of beings?” He was now thinking both of the goblins and house-elves.

The ghost made eye contact with him for a few seconds, as if trying to judge his sincerity. Finally, the response came. “Every situation is different.” Harry nodded, waiting for the rest of the answer, but the ghost stopped speaking, and it was apparent that what had been said was the whole answer. Wow, thought Harry, that was spectacularly unhelpful. This may be useless, but it still could be a cultural-misunderstanding type of situation. I'll give it one more try.

“In a situation where you have to choose between saving your immediate family from danger, or sacrifice them in order to save your society, which do you think is the best thing to do?”

He saw Sawako’s look of surprise; even Sato turned for a second to look at him. The ghost seemed to pause to make sure he’d heard correctly, then regarded Harry with disdain. “Perhaps you have been given an incorrect impression, but I am not some oracle to attempt to befuddle with hypothetical ethical postulates. My purpose is to give guidance relevant to people’s lives, not answer trick questions. I will now take my leave.” The ghost flew back through the shrine, and was gone.

Harry was embarrassed that the Satos were all looking at him, and angry with the ghost for dismissing his questions. Trying to control his feelings, he said to Sato, “He may not believe it, but I did ask questions according to what you said.” He sighed, and decided to leave; with a little effort to get out of the uncomfortable sitting position, he stood. “Excuse me.” He was halfway out of the room when he heard a familiar voice behind him.

“Now, now, my lad, you’re not getting out of here that easily,” the voice said haughtily. Harry whirled around to see Fred looking down at him imperiously, hovering a foot off the ground, with a sly grin.

“Fred!” Harry exclaimed, grinning broadly. “What are you doing here?”

“You were thinking about me, and I heard it. This thing,” Fred gestured to the shrine, “seems to be a bit of a ghostly amplifier when it’s activated. So, I see you’ve decided to impose on these very nice people. Downright rude, if you ask me. You need to leave them be, and do your imposing on those who know how to deal with you!”

Harry laughed. He was aware of the Satos gawking at the highly unexpected turn of events, but he didn’t care. “I know, Fred. I appreciate it. How’s everyone back there?”

Fred shrugged. “Okay, I guess. The shop’s starting to do better. That is what you meant, right?”

Harry laughed again. "Yes, that's what I meant. I'm glad the shop's doing well. How are the customers taking to you?"

"Not bad, I've only scared a few of them off. George and I had words about it—he seems to think my loyalty to the bottom line's in question, since I can't enjoy the worldly benefits anymore—but if you ask me, anyone who can't handle a ghost trying to help them has no business in a shop like that in the first place! I mean, am I right?"

"You're absolutely right, Fred," grinned Harry. "Tell George I said so."

"Right, then! That settles it. So, Harry, what brought you here?"

"Fate, and the good people at British Airways," Harry said jokingly, enjoying the opportunity to do so. "It's a very interesting country. Very, very different from ours. For example, I think that what you're doing right now would be considered very inappropriate."

Fred gave him a disdainful wave of the hand. "Appropriateness isn't what it's cracked up to be. C'mon, Harry. Even when I was alive, was I ever appropriate?"

"No. And I wouldn't have you any other way."

"Exactly."

"But I bet your mother would."

Fred smiled. "Well, of course, what mother wouldn't. So, no chance we can get them to deport you?"

His smile fading, Harry shook his head. "Sorry. I appreciate the sentiment, but... I just need to be away from there."

"You mean, away from His Highness?"

Harry didn't understand for a second, then realized the 'king' reference. "Not him particularly, though he's obviously not my favorite person right now. No, just everything. I just... it was all too much, you

know? I just feel like it never would have stopped. It would have been that, then another thing... I can't even tell you what the last thing was, but—“

“He told us.”

Harry's eyebrows went high. “Wow. I didn't think he would.”

“Well, Dumbledore insisted. We were all, oh, what's the word... furious, yeah, that's it. I thought Ron was going to haul off and slug him. He really had a few choice words for him. I mean, he may be the Minister, but that doesn't mean he gets to do anything he wants. He was way out of line.”

Harry felt a surge of emotion, appreciating Ron's ire on his behalf. “Yeah. Well... it was bad. It still is, which is part of the reason I don't want to go back. It's like, your mind overloads at a certain point. I appreciate your visiting, though you probably shouldn't do it in this way anymore.” He gestured to the shrine.

“Hey, we're not finished yet. You didn't get answers to your three questions.” Harry had almost forgotten what he'd asked. Fred struck a pompous pose. “About revenge: the answer is yes. Quick, brutal, and decisive. Make them regret doing whatever they did.” Again, Harry laughed out loud.

“The second, about domination. The answer is yes. The house-elves are begging to be dominated, and the goblins... well, they're begging for a thrashing. No one's seen one since you were rescued, but I wouldn't give a Knut for their chances, after what they did to you. Which gets us back to the first question. Revenge. You better believe it. Every last person in England wants revenge on your behalf.

“The last one...” Fred's expression became uncharacteristically serious. “Harry, you did the right thing.”

“It doesn't feel like it.”

“I know, that's the point. It's horrible, and Kingsley is scum for not getting your permission... but everyone knows that's the thing to do.

That's not the question; the question is whether you can do it. All I can say is... Ron and Hermione know that they were in... that last scene. They both said they thought you did the right thing. And they were both proud that they were important enough to you to be there."

Overcome with emotion, Harry fought to hold back tears. "Thank you. Tell them... I love them, and I miss them." I couldn't say that to their faces, he thought, but I can say it like this.

Fred smiled sadly. "Harry, they'll never believe you really said that."

"You mean, with your reputation for honesty?"

"Exactly my point."

Still emotional, Harry smiled a little. "To prove I said it, tell Hermione... I forgive her, for my wand. And Ron, I forgive him for the letter."

"No hint as to what this means?"

Harry shook his head. "Sorry. They'll know. And... thanks."

Fred shrugged theatrically. "What are ghosts for? Don't worry, they'll get the message. And if you want to talk to me again, you know what to do." Fred made a deep bow, turned, zoomed through the shrine, and was gone.

In the silence, Harry turned to the stunned Satos. "Sorry about that. I think he won't do it again. But... it did me a lot of good. Excuse me." Harry walked out and to his bedroom, with a lot to think about.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 15, Dueling: On Harry's first day as a visiting student, he is insulted by an older student, and causes a 'social earthquake' when he's unable to resist when a chance for revenge comes along.

From Chapter 15: "Get an older student angry, they'll harass you, and your friends can't help you. You just have to take it."

Harry sighed. "Well, I may not be here long, then, because I'm not taking anything from older students. I can defend myself pretty well, and if they come after me, I'm not going to just lie down."

"Harry... sometimes, that's just what you have to do."

"No, it's what you have to do. I don't have to."

Chapter 15

Dueling

Harry joined the family for breakfast at a quarter after seven the next morning; as he sat, Masako and Maeko were just finishing their meals. Masako soon left to go to her school; Maeko left after Sawako thanked her for making the food, and assuring Maeko that she would take care of cleaning up.

Harry hadn't talked to any Satos since Fred's visit the night before. He returned their morning greeting, 'ohayo gozaimasu,' with his own; he had started to learn a few basic Japanese phrases the day before, thinking he shouldn't rely exclusively on his translator. Also, Sawako had suggested that many Japanese would be impressed that he was at least trying to learn the language.

Sato asked him if he slept well, but after that, there was mostly silence at the table. The previous day, there had been a lot of conversation—Satos explaining various Japanese customs—at breakfast, so Harry guessed that they were uncomfortable, and thought he should say something.

"Um... I'm sorry about last night. I didn't know he was going to come, and I don't want you to think I don't respect the shrine, and how important it is to you. I know that for you, he acted pretty strange. To be honest, he is a little strange, even for British people. But... your ghosts come through to help you, and he came through to help me. And he did."

"Of course, Harry-san," said Sato. "We know that unusual things will happen when cultures interact. It was simply... very surprising for us."

Harry grinned a little. "I can imagine."

Now, Sato looked hesitant. "Not wishing to pry, but..."

Harry felt they were entitled, so he said, "Of course. You can ask anything you want."

“Who was he?”

“His name is, or was, Fred Weasley. He died a few months ago, fighting the Dark wizard who had taken over our country.” Harry went on to explain that Fred had stayed behind for George’s sake, and Fred and George’s local fame for their constant joking. “What you saw was his typical character, except at the end, when he was serious. He’s rarely serious.”

Yasunori spoke, a little timidly. “Was he older than you?”

Surprised, Harry nodded. “Two years older. Why?”

“Well... I couldn’t understand what he said, but the way you were talking to him, it was very... familiar. He is older than you, and he is an honored spirit...” Yasunori trailed off, but Harry understood.

“Well, first of all, we don’t talk to ghosts any differently than we talk to each other. They aren’t especially... revered in our culture. Not that we don’t respect them, but they’re not that different from the living.” Amazed, Yasunori involuntarily glanced at his father, who nodded.

“Secondly, in our culture, we don’t respect people specifically because they’re older. If it’s a situation like teacher-student, parent-child, boss-employee, there’s a difference in the respect shown, though it’s probably less of a difference than it is with you. But if the difference is only a few years... we don’t care. To me, he’s not my elder, he’s my friend. But even if someone’s ten years older than me, I don’t care, and he doesn’t care. We’re equals.”

Yasunori now appeared shocked beyond words; his father spoke to him. “This, Yasu-kun, was one of the most difficult things for me to get used to about other countries. Harry-san is absolutely right, and I have met Westerners whose manner is similar to that of the honored spirit we saw last night. Such people are often well-liked for their humor, and their irreverent attitude is not held against them.” Turning to Harry, he said, “Harry-san, please feel free to decline to answer any question you choose...” Harry nodded, and waved for Sato to go ahead. “I did understand what was said, of course—the actual words, that is. Much escaped my understanding. But at one point, Fred-san

referred to your late headmaster as if he were still living: ‘Dumbledore insisted.’”

“His portrait,” explained Harry. Nodding, Sato explained it to his wife and son, who were clearly fascinated. “We do not have such portraits in Japan,” he said to Harry. “We would not need them, since we have the honored spirits themselves.”

“That makes sense,” agreed Harry. Lots of differences, he thought.

“Can I ask another question, on a different topic?” asked Yasunori.

“Sure,” said Harry, taking a mouthful of rice.

“I hope you don’t consider this an impolite question—“

“Yasunori-san, in my culture, only very personal questions are considered impolite. If there’s a question that would offend me, it would be so personal that you would never in a million years ask it. So, go ahead.”

Yasunori nodded. “That scar, on your forehead. How did you get it?”

Even though it was simple, it seemed like a strange question to Harry. After a second, he realized why, and started to laugh. To even his own surprise, he continued laughing for a short time.

Scandalized, Yasunori apologized. “I’m very sorry—“

Harry waved him off as his laughter started to subside. “No, it’s no problem. I should apologize,” he said, chuckling. “It’s a natural question. The reason I laugh is... difficult to explain. The scar is probably my most obvious physical characteristic, but nobody has ever asked me that question before.”

Yasunori looked stricken. “Because they didn’t want to pry?”

“No. Because they already knew. Everyone in British wizarding society, whether they’ve met me or not, knows how I got this scar.” Figuring it was time to clear the air, he turned to Sato. Deciding to act

as he would if he hadn't heard what Sato had told his family the day he joined them, he said, "Sato-san, you're the Deputy Foreign Minister for English-speaking countries. Do you read the Daily Prophet?"

Sato nodded gravely, understanding where Harry was going. "Sometimes. I skim it, at least."

"So, you know about me."

Sato shrugged lightly. "It would be difficult not to, if one knows anything at all about England."

Harry nodded. "Well... I appreciate your pretending that you didn't know."

With a small grin, Sato responded, "I pretended I did not know that you are famous, and you pretended you were not famous. We had a common purpose."

Harry smiled. "I suppose so. Maybe that was one reason for me to go to another country. To not be famous... seems very appealing. To not have people staring all the time... well, okay, they stare here, but at least it's for a different reason. It doesn't seem so bad. Anyway... did you tell them?"

Sato nodded. "Basic information only, few details. I apologize, because I know you would rather as few people as possible knew, and I respect and admire your desire to be treated as an ordinary person. But you deserve to be treated with great respect, so I would rather that people who will deal with you a lot know this. I have told my family, and the headmaster of Yasunori's school, which you will begin attending in a few days. I asked him not to tell the students, and he told me that he would not."

Harry wished Sato hadn't done that. "You know, I don't need people to treat me with great respect. Just like an average person will do fine."

“I know, but as I have said, some Japanese have a certain unfortunate prejudice when it comes to foreigners. I am merely hoping to avoid any repeats of what happened in the Ministry hallways.”

Harry nodded, reluctantly supposing he could understand that, from Sato’s point of view. “Anyway... could you explain the story to Yasunori?”

Sato did so, conveying everything that was public knowledge, including how well-known Harry was. “I also told them, briefly, what you did in the forest, and about your defeating Voldemort,” he added to Harry. “To be honest, part of me wishes I could have this printed in our newspaper. We have historical stories of people who gave their lives for their society, and such people are greatly respected, even revered. It is the finest thing a person can do.”

“Except, they don’t usually survive,” Harry added, with a wry grin. “Even I’m still not totally sure why I survived in the forest.” He was definitely not going to get into the Horcruxes. “Anyway, I do appreciate your resisting the urge to have it printed in the newspaper.”

They asked a few more questions, and the conversation moved to other topics. Just as well that it’s out in the open, he thought. But I still can’t get away from being Harry Potter. At least this is one good thing about how restrained the Japanese are. They may be impressed by famous people, but at least they’ll pretend they aren’t. That’s something, I suppose.

* * * * *

Yasunori’s school wasn’t in session that day—it was Saturday, the Satos would visit their ancestors’ gravesite on Sunday, and he and Yasunori would go to school on Monday—but his father had asked him to go to the school with Harry and show him around so it wouldn’t be so unfamiliar on Monday. They took the Portkey, and found themselves in a small cubicle in a small structure that had a roof but no doors. As they stepped out into the open, Harry looked back and realized that there were twelve such cubicles, and that the whole

purpose of the building was to be a sort of Portkey station. The building was circular, and one-twelfth of the space was devoted to each student's Portkey station. Motioning back at the Portkey, Harry asked, "Yasunori, what's—I'm sorry, I mean, Yasunori-san—"

The young man shook his head. "If it's just us two, 'Yasunori' is okay."

Harry nodded. "Okay, if you call me Harry. Anyway, what's to stop someone, anyone, from getting into someone else's home by taking their Portkey?"

Yasunori seemed surprised at the notion. "Well, nothing, but... we wouldn't do that."

Now Harry was surprised. "Everyone is so honest? Nobody would even consider stealing something from someone else?"

"No, that does happen, but it's rare. Especially once you're an adult, doing that would give you a terrible reputation, and would cause you problems for the rest of your life. Kids do it occasionally, but they get seriously punished if they do. People our age... once you're seventeen, you're not an adult yet, but you're expected to act like one." He gestured toward the school; Harry could see one tall castle about a hundred meters away, with other smaller buildings spread around among grass fields and the occasional tree; a few looked hundreds of years old. They walked toward the castle.

"The school is mainly for training, but it's also expected to make sure we become good members of society," Yasunori went on. "Of course, that's true for all schools. If we do anything an adult isn't supposed to do, our parents hear about it, and it's a big deal. If it happens three times, our patriarchs hear about it, which is even worse. Then it's a huge deal, like, you're in danger of becoming a ronin. Not that you really are, but that's how big a deal they make of it. It's not like that at your school?"

Harry had already talked about Hogwarts, but more about the classes than the social environment. "As long as the students follow the rules, the teachers pretty much leave them alone. No one's supposed to act any particular way."

Yasunori shook his head. "Incredible. It seems like society would be really chaotic."

"I suppose to you, it would seem that way," agreed Harry. "But we're used to it."

Yasunori looked uncomfortable. "Can I tell you a secret?"

A little surprised, Harry nodded. "Sure. I can keep a secret."

"You said yesterday, that it seemed like there wouldn't be anything to talk to the honored ancestors about. It was amazing, because I've said that to my father before. I'm supposed to talk to them every now and then, but it seems more like a chore than something that helps me. I feel like, because I'm young, they can't understand me, and they give advice that doesn't help at all. When I said that to my father, he criticized me, saying I must be asking the wrong questions. But your questions were really good, really important questions, and you didn't get answers. So, what good does it do us?"

Good question, thought Harry. "I don't know. Have you talked to your school friends about it?"

"There are only two I trust enough to say something like that to, and not have it get around. They said they feel the same as me, but one of them said another guy told him that his ancestors, one in particular, understands him well and gives good advice, and he's glad he can talk to that ancestor. Maybe I just..."

Yasunori trailed off, but Harry could guess the rest. "Maybe your ancestors just aren't that helpful, but you can't say that, because in your culture it would be really offensive to say anything like that."

Yasunori nodded. "Once, when I was ten, I was angry about something and in a bad mood, and I said to my parents, 'I don't want to talk to the stupid ancestors.'"

Even after less than a week in Japan, Harry could understand what this meant. "Wow. I guess that was a serious mistake."

"Yeah," said Yasunori ruefully. "It was a year before I stopped hearing about it. I got very long lectures on how important the ancestors are, how important the Antiquity Link is, and I had to apologize to each honored ancestor individually. When I think about it now, I think my parents were actually worried that I might become like a ronin, someone who doesn't want to live in society."

"Well, I suppose if the punishment for having different ideas is exile, then they would worry about that," said Harry.

"I think it's not having different ideas," suggested Yasunori. "You can think anything you want; they can't stop that. It's—"

Harry understood. "What you say, what you do, how you act." Yasunori nodded. "You're right, I shouldn't have said it like that. But what is the Antiquity Link? I thought I heard your father mention it last night, when he was summoning the ghost."

"You mean, honored spirit," said Yasunori, with the barest of smiles, indicating that he wasn't serious, but that any Japanese who said 'ghost' would be corrected in such a way. "Or, 'honored ancestor' is okay. Anyway, last night, you said it was hard for ghosts to stay around, after the person has died. I hadn't known that, or thought about it, but it made me understand the Antiquity Link a little better.

"The Antiquity Link is a spell that connects father and son, mother and daughter. There are ceremonies. At seventeen, you're considered like a 'pre-adult,' with adult responsibilities but no adult rights. Things that would be forgiven as a child aren't anymore. Anyway, at seventeen, there's a ceremony to initiate the Antiquity Link, between you and your father, and at twenty, to complete it. It somehow links the generations magically. I was told that it's necessary to do it to be able to talk to your ancestors, and to make sure your children can, but I wasn't told more details than that. But after what you said, now I think I know more. You said it's hard for ghosts to stay, that they naturally want to go wherever they go. I think the Antiquity Link is designed to make it easier for them to stay behind as ghosts, that that's its main purpose. If it links the generations together, then that makes sense. Probably without it, a

lot of ghosts wouldn't stay behind, like it is in your country. I'd guess that when you die, the Link is there, and you kind of grab onto it or something."

"That makes sense," said Harry. "Very interesting. It's really amazing how the cultures are so different."

"But wouldn't you—" Looking abashed, Yasunori suddenly cut himself off.

"What?" asked Harry.

"Nothing, it's okay."

"Yasunori, you can ask anything you want. It's okay."

"My father said that we shouldn't ask you many questions, especially about family matters, because you had a lot of hard times in your life. I don't want to cause any problems," said Yasunori uncomfortably.

"Well... that's very kind of him, but I think he's worrying too much. And I can't promise I'll answer every question, because some bad stuff did happen recently. But I'll tell you what. You should ask any question you want, and if I'm not comfortable answering it, I'll just say, I'd rather not answer that right now. I won't be offended that you asked, and you won't be offended that I didn't answer. What do you think?"

Yasunori thought for a minute. "I think it would never occur to a Japanese to say what you said, but I'm starting to understand your culture enough that what you said makes sense. So, okay, I'll try."

"Good. So, what was your question?"

"Hmmm... now, I've forgotten it." Harry grinned. "Just a minute... oh, yes, I remember. I was going to ask, my father said this morning that your parents died when you were a baby. Have you ever wished that they had stayed behind as ghosts?"

They had almost reached the large castle, so they stopped. “Well, I didn’t know about ghosts until I was eleven, because I grew up with Muggles. But after that, sure, there were times I wished they had. I don’t think that ghosts exactly have a good time, though, and now I think it’s better that they didn’t. I think we all need to do what’s best for us, and if moving on was what was best for them, then that’s what they should have done.”

“In our culture, we are supposed to do what is best for others, best for society, before we do what is best for ourselves. I don’t mean to criticize them,” Yasunori hastily added. “I’m just saying, that’s what our society says.”

“Obviously, a lot of things we do affect other people, and we think about that. But if it’s mostly us that’s affected...” Harry tried to think of an example, and came up with one inspired by the Dursleys. “Let’s say that your father owns a business, and he plans to pass it along to you. Maybe he teaches you about it, trains you for it. But you really don’t want to do it, it’s not interesting or exciting for you, or you really want to do something else. Do you do it anyway?”

“Yes,” said Yasunori, to Harry’s surprise. “Your father has placed his hopes on you, and you shouldn’t disappoint him. Especially if you’re the first-born son. If there are two sons, and the second one wants to do it, then maybe that’s okay, though the father still might be disappointed. But if you’re the only son, then yes, you do it.”

“Even if you don’t want to?” asked Harry, with mild incredulity. “Even if you’re not happy doing it? I mean, this is your life, and except for your marriage, your job is the most important thing in your life. You’re really going to do something you don’t want to, just to make your father happy?”

Yasunori shrugged. “For us, filial piety is very important, it’s one of—“

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Filial piety.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand that.”

Yasunori frowned. "Is your translator not working?"

"No, I hear the words in English. Filial piety." Yasunori nodded. "But I don't know what 'filial piety' means, in English. I've never heard the words before. Could you describe it, using other words?"

Bewildered, Yasunori thought, then answered. "It's the idea that we should be good children, loyal and respectful and kind to our parents. We should do things for our parents, and be the people they would like us to be. Maybe you could say, devotion to one's parents. Are you understanding that?"

Harry nodded. "Okay, I get it, I understand. But we just don't have this idea. I mean, of course, we should be good to our parents and respect them, but it's not an important cultural idea. Nobody would say, 'you know, you're not good enough to your parents.' It just wouldn't occur to us, unless someone was treating their parents very badly."

"Wow," said an amazed Yasunori. "For us, it's extremely important. It's one of the big things we get judged by. I guess it's related to 'respecting one's elders,' part of that whole idea. And I hadn't thought of it this way before, but that's probably part of why the Antiquity Link is so important, that it connects you and your father. Doing it is a kind of filial piety. And you mentioned marriage, but that's not always our choice, either. If we're not married, and our parents find someone for us, it's expected that we'll marry them. Even if we find someone first, our parents have to approve them. If they don't, we can't marry them."

"You're kidding!" Harry was stunned. "What about love?"

"Well, that would be nice," Yasunori admitted. "But love doesn't last forever anyway. Compatibility is important, and parents do consider that. If the people hate each other, the parents won't insist. But love comes with time."

"Incredible. Funny how you and I are both amazed at what the other country does. In my close friend's family—the family of the ghost you

saw—one of their sons got married, even though his mother didn't like the woman he married. She's gotten used to her, but we marry who we love. Our parents have to accept it. But with you, you marry who your parents want, and you have to accept it."

"So, you don't have any arranged marriages?"

"Well, maybe a hundred years ago. I heard about them. But now, no."

Yasunori shook his head. "Well, we should go into the castle. This is the main area where lessons take place. As you can see, the castle has seven floors." Harry looked up; each level was square, with each floor slightly smaller than the one below it. "The first two floors are for first years, which is us, the next two are for second years, and the top three floors are for third years. They get more space—"

"Because they're senior," Harry finished.

"Yes, that's right." They walked into a large classroom, the floor consisting of tatami mats. Harry saw several stacks of large cushions against the wall, clearly each student sat on one in the class. "One thing you have to remember," said Yasunori, "is that seniority is very important. If a student is older than you, you have to behave respectfully. Don't talk to him unless he asks you to, use polite language, apologize if he criticizes you."

"Even if the criticism isn't justified?"

"Especially if the criticism isn't justified. Sometimes older students will criticize you for something stupid, or something that's just not true. The idea is to see if he can provoke you into responding inappropriately, then he has an excuse to harass you. You know, 'he talked back to me!' If you're wearing a brand new uniform, and an older student says that it's old and wrinkled, you say, 'yes sir, I'm sorry, sir.' Now, most older students don't do that, and don't repeat this, but most of us think the ones who do are jerks. But we still have to put up with it."

Harry grunted. "At my school, the answer would be, 'you need to have your eyes checked.'"

Yasunori chuckled. "I'd love to say that. Wouldn't they punish you for it?"

"They might, I suppose," allowed Harry. "The more friends you have, the less likely it would be to happen."

"Ah. Here, it wouldn't matter how many friends you have. Get an older student angry, they'll harass you, and your friends can't help you. You just have to take it."

Harry sighed. "Well, I may not be here long, then, because I'm not taking anything from older students. I can defend myself pretty well, and if they come after me, I'm not going to just lie down."

"Harry... sometimes, that's just what you have to do."

"No, it's what you have to do. I don't have to."

"But you're here, in this country, at this school. The rules apply to everyone, including you."

"Is it a school rule that you have to take abuse from seniors?" If it is, thought Harry, then I'm out of here, right now.

"No, but it's a social rule—"

"Yes, and I'm not a member of your society. I'm just visiting. I'm outside the whole thing. In any case, I'm not capable of just taking it if some nineteen-year-old asshole decides he wants to make an example of me."

Yasunori's eyes widened in shock. "I'd really recommend you not use that word, with... well, anyone, really. I'm not offended, but you should be careful."

"Okay. I'm just talking to you now, and I think of you as an equal."

Yasunori seemed pleased. "I understand. But what do you mean, you're not capable? It sounds like you mean, you just don't want to. But nobody wants to, but sometimes you have to."

"Not without a fight," countered Harry; he thought about how to make Yasunori understand what he meant. "Look... I fought against a wizard who killed hundreds, including my parents, a wizard whose name most people were afraid to say. This isn't to brag, it's just a fact. My point is that if I was the kind of person who could just accept stupid harassment like that, who didn't stand up for myself, then I couldn't be the kind of person who could fight against that wizard. Does that make any sense? I do mean, I just couldn't do it."

"It's... hard to understand. I mean, I believe you, it's just really unfamiliar to me. I couldn't fight against a wizard like that."

"You probably could if you had no choice," responded Harry wryly.

"No, I probably couldn't. Only an Auror could. Why was it you that had to fight him, anyway? Why couldn't others do it?"

"To really explain that requires a very long story, and to be honest, it's one I don't feel ready to tell anyway. Sorry."

"No, it's okay. I'm sorry for asking."

"You don't have to be sorry for asking."

"Then you don't have to be sorry for not answering. Right?"

Harry grinned. "Okay, you got me. Let's look around more."

* * * * *

At a few minutes before six o'clock, Harry and Yasunori walked out of the Portkey cubicle near the Sato living room, took off their shoes, and put them away. "Tadaima!" they both shouted, Harry having decided he should get in the habit, if for no other reason than respecting the household customs.

Sato was in the living room, reading. "Okaeri," he responded, putting down his book. "How did it go?"

"It was fine," answered Yasunori. "There wasn't so much to show Harry-san, really, but at least he knows what everything looks like. The headmaster saw us, and asked us to talk with him for a few minutes. I think he mainly wanted to be sure that he and Harry-san had the same understanding about Harry-san's situation at the school."

"I told him I would respect the teachers, and that I'd try to bite my tongue if any of them give me a hard time," said Harry. "At least, I have some experience at that. But I also told him that I wouldn't put up with it from older students, that I'd defend myself. He said he understood, and that the school wouldn't get involved with how I dealt with other students. He said that students will be told to consider me as though I was on the same level as them, no matter what year they are. Teachers will be asked, not told, to give me a little latitude because there can be cultural misunderstandings, but not to be shy about telling me that I've done something wrong. I can live with that. Also, I'll get special dispensation with the whole seiza business. I can't imagine how you stay in that position for ten minutes, never mind an hour."

Sato smiled. "Foreigners have considerable trouble with sitting in that position for any length of time. You would be well advised, however, to at least do it for as long as you can, for the sake of showing your best effort."

Harry nodded. "Okay. But that reminds me, I wanted to ask about a few language points. One is that the headmaster used phrases like 'do your best' or 'try your hardest' like, four or five times in fifteen minutes. Is that just him, or just a common phrase here, or a cultural thing? I mean, it's not a phrase that comes up so often where I'm from."

"It's the culture," Sato explained. "We put great emphasis on doing one's best. My experience is that in Western countries, the roughly equivalent idea is 'get the job done.' They care more about the result. We care more about the process, and the person's effort and what it

shows about their character. That the person tried their best is more important than what they actually accomplished. But in Western countries, how hard you tried is usually irrelevant. 'You don't get points for effort' is a phrase I heard more than once."

"Interesting. Well, I'll try hard to do my best," Harry half-joked. "The other thing that didn't seem to translate very well was a phrase I used that he," gesturing to Yasunori, "didn't get very well. I said something like it was important for me to stand up for myself. He didn't seem to get what I was saying."

"Yes, we do not really have the same phrase," said Sato thoughtfully. "The best we can do is something like 'be independent' or 'take care of oneself,' which is probably how Yasunori heard it. But I gather you meant something along the lines of 'don't allow others to treat you poorly, defend yourself.'" Harry nodded. "That is not something we say, because we sometimes must accept poor treatment from seniors, and if it comes from equals or juniors, we would use a phrase more like, 'they should act appropriately.' Our emphasis is on preserving social harmony; yours is on protecting individual dignity."

"Wow," said Harry. "It's so incredibly different... lots of things keep coming back to the idea that here, the group is more important than the individual."

Sato nodded. "I had the same experience, in reverse, when I was younger, though not quite so young as you. Australia and New Zealand are mostly individualistic, with some slight emphasis on group identity. But America, which I visited when I was twenty, and was my first foreign country to stay in for a year... I would describe it as militantly individualistic. Australians are individualistic; Americans are individualistic, and proud of it. It was, for me, a staggering culture shock. Part of me wondered, how do these people live? For them, there was virtue in being able to do something, some large task, by oneself. For us, it sounds more shameful, as it implies that you could not get help from others, probably due to social ineptitude."

"In fact..." Sato raised his wand, and Summoned a package from another room; it landed on the table they were sitting at, in front of

Harry. "I did some shopping while you were gone, and I thought I would buy you a few books."

Harry opened the package, and found six hardback books, all in English. The one on top was titled, "For the Good of Society: An American's Five Years in Japan," by Thaddeus Stanton. Harry picked it up and flipped through it.

"I think that is the most important one, for you," said Sato. "I read it long ago, a friend's copy. It is most interesting, a well-written first-person account of the difficulties of adapting to such a different society. It is not exactly the same as your situation; the writer of this book genuinely wanted to fully adapt to Japanese society, be a part of it as much as possible. Ultimately, he found that he could not truly do so. He found Japanese society to be 'tribal,' and that the only way to be fully accepted is to be born into it. But his struggle, and his experiences, are fascinating, and may be highly instructive for you."

Harry was touched. "Thank you very much," he said simply. He wanted to offer to pay him for the books, but knew enough to know that such an offer would be inappropriate, if not insulting. "They sell books like this in Japan?"

"No, I purchased them in New York," replied Sato. "There is a magical way to travel to distant countries, and it takes only a few minutes. Normally, much paperwork must be done, but my position allows me to make such visits any time I choose. After I returned to the Ministry, I found an urgent summons to visit my counterpart in England. I went to their Ministry, to find that an audience with me had been requested by Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger."

Harry's face lit up. "What did they say?"

"They mostly inquired after you, asking how you were doing. I told them that you had said you needed a change of scenery, and that it seemed to be having a good effect. They were most concerned, Miss Granger even going so far as to ask if you were eating properly. I assured her you were."

Harry laughed. "Probably Molly, the Weasleys' mother, told her to ask that."

"They got the message from the honored ancestor who visited us last night. Mr. Weasley said that your message moved Miss Granger to tears, though he added, 'not that that's so hard.'" Harry laughed again. "I suspect you would have been amused at their interaction."

Grinning, Harry said, "I'm sure I would have. Ron's right, she does cry relatively easily."

"I will admit that I was discomfited a few times; I am used to talking to foreign people in a diplomatic context, and they are not very diplomatic. The first time I referred to Mr. Weasley's older brother as an 'honored ancestor,' he... giggled uncontrollably, and took more than a minute to get under control."

Harry laughed loudly. "I can imagine. It's very funny, but you have to know the family to really understand the humor. I bet he starts calling Fred that from now on."

"He actually said that he would do just that," said an impressed Sato. "You certainly know him quite well."

"I should, we lived together for seven years. By the way, I just want to make sure you know that he wasn't making fun of you. It just happens to be an extremely funny combination, that phrase and Fred's character."

"I should have added, after he recovered, he apologized and said roughly the same thing, assuring me that no offense was intended. There is not so much else to report, except that they said that while they wished you had not left, they want you to know that they completely understand why you did, and while they want you back, it is more important that you do whatever you feel is best for you."

Not surprised, Harry nodded. "The individual, not the group."

“Indeed,” agreed Sato. “Lastly, they said that if there was anything at all they could do on your behalf, I had only to ask. I thanked them, and said I would contact them in such an event.”

“It’s very nice of them to offer,” said Harry, “but right now, there’s nothing really that they can do. But just getting the message is very helpful. So, thank you for that.”

“It was my pleasure, of course,” responded Sato.

Harry excused himself, picked up the books, and went to his bedroom to put them away, then to the bathroom, and back to his bedroom to look at them. He had left the door open a little, and while he had tried not to use his newly acute hearing to overhear household conversations in other rooms, he heard his name mentioned between Sato and his son, and listened.

“...so his friends want him back, but they also want him to stay here? I don’t understand that.”

“As you just heard Harry-san mention, his society focuses on the individual, not the group. A person does what is best for him or herself, and society understands and approves of this, provided it harms no one. And even if it inconveniences others, if the benefit to him is greater than the inconvenience to them, it is approved. Westerners do not hide their feelings as well as we do, sometimes not at all; I could see in their faces and eyes Harry-san’s friends’ deep affection and concern for him. For themselves, they would prefer he returned. But they know he has been through much; Mr. Weasley even said, ‘He’s been through more than you know, more than is publicly known. Please take good care of him.’ So, their concern is for him more than for themselves.”

“But wouldn’t he be happier around the people who care about him so much?”

“It would seem to us so,” agreed Sato. “But we must keep in mind that his position is unique; he is extremely famous in his society, nearly an icon. If you asked English wizards to name a hero, most would name him. But such fame is accompanied by pressure. More

importantly, we cannot know how he feels, and even his friends cannot completely know. We Japanese tend to feel that what is best for one person is best for everyone, that everyone should feel the same way about things. Most of his people feel that each of them must be the one to decide what is best for them.

“For example, there was an article in the main English newspaper today; I picked up a copy after visiting Harry-san’s friends. It has been announced by their Ministry that Harry-san is undertaking world travel for his own growth and breadth of experience. Many normal people were asked about this; bear in mind that this was after he had been kidnapped and treated very badly by his captors. Many citizens interviewed by the newspaper do not believe the official line, and assume that Harry-san’s trip was prompted by the need to recuperate, or to ‘get away from it all,’ as one woman said. But the vast majority of opinion was similar to that of his friends: they wish he had not gone, but respect his need to do what he feels is best.

“Now, compare this to us. If he were Japanese, he would not have gone, feeling he had a duty to his society that overrode any stress or difficulty he felt. If he had gone, he would have done it in an official way, involving requesting permission, and then government officials or his patriarch would have tried to dissuade him. Then, finally, if he were somehow able to overcome their objections and go, society would feel abandoned, and mystified that he had abandoned them.”

“People would say he was acting selfishly,” suggested Yasunori.

“Yes, exactly,” said Sato. “But they would not truly know how he felt, even if they thought they did. Let me tell you a little secret, Yasu-kun: our society operates as though we all have the same reactions to things, that we think the same way, that things affect us the same way. But the fact is, we are all different. Society simply demands that we react largely as if we were the same, for the sake of social harmony. So, we sometimes feel bound by the ‘chains of society.’ Harry-san’s society makes no such demands.”

“Well,” said Yasunori, “I can understand why that would seem good; some people would like the freedom. But what do you think are the bad things about it?”

"A lack of a place in society, for some people," responded Sato. "Some people are isolated, alone, with no one to look after them. It is easy for them to be lost by society. Also, there can be a lack of social cohesion. For example, Harry-san's society was recently taken over by a powerful Dark wizard, the one Harry-san ended up defeating. I am reasonably sure that could not happen here. The wizard would have been identified in childhood as a potential problem, and efforts would have been taken to put him on the right path. Finally failing that, he would have been made ronin. Their social bonds are loose, so such a person could slip through the cracks. Ours are tight, so it would have been impossible. Such heroism as Harry-san showed would not have been necessary."

"So, you think Japanese can't be heroic?" asked Yasunori.

"No, I don't think that," answered his father. "But ours comes through in different ways. If you are very different, you act as if you are the same, for the good of society. It is not always easy to sublimate your own desires for the sake of the group. Harry-san's outstanding heroism kept his society together. With us, it is thousands of small acts of courage, of self-sacrifice, that keep our society together."

"Which way do you think is better?" asked Yasunori.

Harry heard Sawako call for her husband from the kitchen. "I think," said Sato to his son, "that their way is better for them, and our way is better for us."

Harry chuckled to himself. Typical answer for this country, he thought. Doesn't come down on one side. Then again, from what I've seen, a lot of Japanese would simply say that their way was better. I suppose because of his experience in both countries, he can see both sides. Could Voldemort really never have happened here? Interesting question. He picked up the Stanton book, and began reading.

* * * * *

Two days later, he and Yasunori walked into Yasunori's Portkey cubicle, and were soon at the school's Portkey station. Yasunori

walked over to two young men, both shorter than Harry. Yasunori introduced them, Harry remembering to bow rather than shake hands. They were Yasunori's two closest friends at the school, named Yusuke Kato and Yosuke Sakata; Harry struggled to remember the names, and which was Yosuke and which was Yusuke, as they sounded a little too similar. Yosuke is shorter, and Yusuke is the one with the narrower eyes, he thought. Hope I can remember that.

As the four walked to the castle, the first question was about Harry's family, which he had learned was an important topic in Japan. When he explained that he was an orphan raised by Muggles, they seemed taken aback, and became quiet. For the others' benefit, Yasunori asked Harry about Hogwarts, and Yosuke and Yusuke started asking him questions about that. Ah, a safe conversational topic, thought Harry. I'm probably going to be doing a lot of talking about Hogwarts.

As they got closer to the castle, they passed groups of three or four students who were standing around chatting. Harry noticed some conversations stop, and as at the Ministry, several students were staring unabashedly.

Approaching the castle's large, ornate wooden doors, Harry heard a voice say, "Hey, Sato! What's that?"

Yasunori cringed slightly as Harry turned his head to see that the young man who had spoken was wearing a black robe with red trim, indicating that he was a second-year student; Harry and the others' robes had yellow trim, to indicate first years. Harry dearly wanted to approach the student and confront him in stark terms, but he wanted to avoid making a scene as much as possible; partly for Yasunori's sake, and partly for the sake of diplomacy. If there was one thing he had learned from Malfoy at Hogwarts, it was to not allow himself to be provoked. Not every jerk had to be responded to.

Harry leaned over and whispered to Yasunori. "Let me guess, the local bully."

"Something like that," said Yasunori. As they entered the castle, they took off their shoes, put them in the small cubbyholes in the wall provided for that purpose, and walked into the classroom.

"I thought you said people here were supposed to act like adults," Harry murmured as they sat on cushions next to each other.

"We are," whispered Yasunori. "But some people don't when the teachers aren't looking. We should be quiet now."

Harry nodded; he had been briefed on proper classroom behavior the day before, learning that once the lesson started, one did not speak out of turn for any reason, and unlike at Hogwarts, every teacher enforced the prohibition strictly (though if one wanted to ask a question, one could request to be called on by holding one's wand no higher than the shoulder and light up the tip of the wand). The lesson hadn't gotten underway yet, but Yasunori clearly wanted to be careful. I guess the last thing he needs is to look bad because of something I do, thought Harry.

A few people were still talking when the instructor Apparated into the room, at the front of the class; conversation stopped instantly. Harry now noticed that there was no blackboard; he had been surprised to learn that books and writing implements were not needed. Nothing more than one's wand was to be brought into the classroom.

"Good day," said the professor.

Harry responded along with the class. "Ohayo gozaimasu," he recited, hoping the pronunciation wasn't too bad. This was one of the phrases he had practiced with Sato the night before.

"Before we begin the summer session, there is an announcement. As you may have noticed, we have a visiting student. The school has been requested by the Foreign Ministry to include him in the summer session. He will now introduce himself."

Again as previously coached, Harry bowed low, hands crossed in front of his waist. "I am Harry Potter, and I come from England. I am pleased and honored to join this class, and I will try hard and do my best. Yoroshiku onegaishimasu." This was the phrase that Harry found hardest; he had to say it in Japanese because no English equivalent existed. A common Japanese greeting, Sato had said its

rough equivalent was, 'please consider me favorably in the future,' but its actual meaning depended on the situation. Here, it was partly that, and partly a ceremonial greeting.

"Yoroshiku," the students chorused. Harry bowed again and sat in the uncomfortable seiza position.

The professor announced that the first week's lessons would consist mainly of review, including individual dueling; group activities would begin next week. Harry gathered from the professor's tone that individual activities were much less important than group activities. Dueling theory was discussed for the first hour, after which there was a five-minute break. Yosuke asked Harry what he knew about dueling; Harry truthfully said he hadn't had much practice in classes. He had practiced with Aurors, he recalled, in his 'other life.' Recalling that Aurors had told him it was important to keep moving, he asked if Japanese were taught to do so.

"They don't teach that," said Yasunori, "but it's allowed. Teachers tend to disparage it, like it's some kind of trick, and a good dueler wouldn't need to do it."

"Until Takenaka, of course," put in Yosuke. Harry had already started to notice that Yosuke was more outgoing, while Yusuke was reserved, rarely speaking.

"Yes, I was getting to that," said Yasunori. "There's a third-year student, named Takenaka, who does that a lot. He's always moving. The teachers can't criticize him much, though, because he wins every bout. Other students have tried it, but it doesn't seem to help. How about you?"

"I was taught to move," said Harry.

Yosuke nodded, eyebrows raised. "Well, this should be interesting."

On the resumption of the lesson, the professor reviewed the basics of dueling: using spells as rapidly as possible without saying incantations, using the blocking spell with maximum effectiveness, which spell combinations were the most effective, and when to

emphasize offense versus defense. Harry was already familiar with most of it, and the Aurors had taught him a few tricks. As he listened, he reflected that this was one of the few occasions where information that from his other life—events that didn't actually happen, but he remembered happening, like Malfoy and the itching powder—could be put to good use. Strange, he thought. It didn't actually happen, but it's as if it did. Before the goblins kidnapped me, I didn't know much about dueling at all.

After another half-hour, they broke up into pairs for casual practice. Harry knew that with his ability to see spells, and the Elder Wand, he would be very difficult to beat, but he didn't want to show off, especially at first; he wanted to seem to have normal ability. He casually traded spells with Yusuke, who seemed to have relatively little ability, then after five minutes with Yosuke, who was much better, then finally with Yasunori, who Harry judged to be almost as good as Yosuke, but not quite. Harry could see the spells coming, but rather than dodge them, he simply blocked them, and occasionally let himself be hit by them.

The class already having broken up into eight groups of four for practice, the professor asked each group to have a round-robin tournament within the group, each person competing against each other person, best three out of five. The room was wide enough for four bouts at a time. Each contestant was on one tatami mat, about one meter by two meters, and would be disqualified for touching any surface other than that tatami mat. Good, thought Harry, enough room to move, if necessary. He was also told that Stunning spells were now allowed, but all other illegal spells remained forbidden.

Harry won within his group, taking nine bouts without a loss, and never having to move. He found that not only was the ability to see spells useful in terms of being able to dodge, but also in that he didn't have to block a spell he could see was going to miss, and since he knew the incoming spell's exact location, he could focus the block in a narrower area, making it stronger.

Everyone but the eight group winners stood at the side of the classroom and watched as the quarterfinalists dueled at the same time. Harry again defeated his opponent with relative ease, noticing

that he was starting to get a lot of attention from those watching on the sidelines.

With now only four students remaining, only one match took place at a time. Harry watched two of his fellow semifinalists fight it out, the winner taking three out of five hard-fought bouts. Taking his place against his opponent, Harry could hear whispers. "Where is England?" "How old is he?" "What kind of spells does he use?" He could see Yasunori shushing classmates trying to ask him questions. This opponent was a little better, but not much.

His final opponent was better, blocking more than others had and shooting spells off more accurately, but Harry was also accurate, and didn't have to block so much. He won all three bouts, and the class applauded politely after the last match. As he had with every other match, Harry exchanged formal bows with his opponent after the match.

It was break time, and Harry suddenly found himself surrounded by a dozen students asking questions. He answered them as best he could, took a quick trip to the bathroom, and the break was over. Upon resumption of the lesson, the professor asked Harry to stand opposite him for some sparring, to talk about his technique. Harry tried to be as general as possible, chalking his performance up to good aim and reflexes. He explained a few spells that were unfamiliar to the class, such as what Aurors had called the 'sinker,' an impact spell that one fired with the wand pointed slightly up, but just before impact, dropped to the opponent's feet, ideally causing him to lose his balance. After ten minutes of observing and analyzing Harry's technique, the professor pronounced it basically sound, but observed that more practice would definitely not hurt. Harry tried not to roll his eyes, as it was definitely the case that this would apply to everyone, even experts. But he agreed, thanked the professor, and took his seat.

Lunchtime was near, and after another ten minutes of lecture, the professor announced that the first-year winner would play against the second-year winner; the winner of that match would then play the third-year winner after lunch. A few minutes later, the second years started marching downstairs and into the classroom. Each year's

students stood on one side of the room, now lining the walls two deep, and the second-year professor asked the contestants to take their positions. As Harry took his place and saw that his opponent was the one who had insulted him and Yasunori earlier, the thought occurred to him: I should have guessed this. Jerks like this guy are more likely to open their mouths wide if they can back it up with their wands. This is going to be fun.

As he bowed to start the match, he noticed his opponent's bow was rather less deep than it should have been, and a primal instinct took over. This was his chance to even the score, and he wasn't going to waste it. The second-year—Harry had heard students saying his name was Murata—started firing spells, all Stunners, as fast as possible. They came in hard, but Harry's blocking spells were up to the challenge. After having one Disarming spell blocked, Harry's instinct told him to just defend for the moment. He ceased all offensive spells, focusing solely on defense, letting missed spells go by without blocking them. A few Stunners caused enough impact to rock him back an inch, but that was all.

After more than a minute, Harry knew that Murata might have been lulled into an all-offense pattern, and it was time to act. A Stunner came directly at his stomach; he pointed his wand directly at it to block it, and his wand was now pointing straight at Murata. With no extra motion to tip his opponent off, Harry shot off a Stunner. Murata never saw it coming, and was plastered against the wall three feet behind him. The students watching oohed and aaahed as the second-year professor Enervated Murata, who stood, clearly angry. Harry allowed a small smile to cross his face, then quickly wiped it off.

Time to mess with his mind now, thought Harry. They faced off again, and Murata's Stunners again came, though not so fast, as he seemed to be worried about his defense. Harry blocked Stunner after Stunner, thinking, does this guy not use any other spells? This must be how he usually wins; he basically overpowers his opponent, who can't see the spells and is bound to miss one once in a while. Brute force, no finesse. I'm just going to make him look like an idiot. See if I can wear him out.

The bout went on for two, three, four minutes, Harry never firing an offensive spell, focusing only on blocking. Murata never went to another spell, continuing the Stunners, seeming to start to tire. Harry wondered if his show of disrespect—I'm just playing with you, I can win this anytime I want—was being understood, and in one savage impulse, decided to make no doubt of it. As soon as his wand was pointed the right way without any extraneous movement, he whispered, 'Levicorpus.' Murata yelled in alarm as he hung nearly upside down in the air; the students gasped as one. For a long second, Harry let him hang, then sent the counter-curse, and Murata fell. Two to zero.

Murata stood, clearly furious, as the students urgently whispered among themselves. Harry stared back at his opponent, a challenge in his eyes. You want me? You come and get me.

They faced off again, and Harry decided again to take sudden, unexpected action. Not worrying about defense, his first shot was a Disarming spell aimed right at Murata's wand hand; he would sidestep the Stunner if necessary. It wasn't, and Murata's wand went flying out of his hand. The bout had lasted about one second. Murata picked up his wand, now so incensed that Harry felt Murata would like nothing better than to physically attack Harry. Harry bowed exactly as Murata had before the bout; Murata even less, his being more like a nod than a bow. The second-year professor announced that it was lunchtime, and the first-year students all trooped out; the second years went back upstairs to get their shoes before leaving.

As they walked to the cafeteria, Harry was surrounded by other first years. "What did you do to him?" exclaimed the one who Harry had beaten in the quarterfinals.

Harry shrugged. "You heard what he said earlier, right?"

"Well, of course, everyone did. But still..."

"Look, I want to be friends with everyone. I really do. But where I'm from, we treat people the way they treat us."

“In that case,” said Yosuke, walking on Harry’s right, “I’m going to treat you really well.” The comment got laughs from several students.

“Well, that’s not necessary,” protested Harry, even though he knew it was a joke. “Just don’t do anything extremely insulting, and we’ll be fine. Just out of curiosity, what he said this morning, was that a big insult by Japanese standards?”

“Oh, it was huge,” said Yosuke, as others nodded agreement. “I was amazed that you didn’t react. I wondered if your translator was working.” This prompted other students to ask to see Harry’s translating artifact, so he held it up to show them. Several students made admiring comments, and one asked if he bought it in Japan.

Box lunches and room-temperature glasses of water and barley tea awaited them at the yellow tables; across the hall, Harry could see the red tables for the second years, and further away, blue tables for the third years. They sat, and started in on their food. “Itadakimasu,” said most students before eating. On Harry’s left, Yasunori asked, “Hey, how does your thing translate that?”

“It doesn’t,” answered Harry, as he used his wooden chopsticks to pick up a mouthful of rice. “It’s like ‘okaeri,’ I don’t get anything. Is it just something you say before eating, doesn’t have any meaning?”

“Yeah. Just a custom.”

“Why say it then, if it has no meaning?”

Yasunori exchanged baffled looks with a few classmates. “I don’t know,” said another student. “We just do.”

“Never thought about that before,” added Yosuke.

Finishing a bite of fish—it was cooked, but Harry had no idea what type it was—Yasunori said, “Yeah, that’s my usual answer when he asks me why we do something. ‘Uh, I don’t know.’ We usually don’t think about it. But that’s why it’s good that he’s here. So we realize why we do things.”

"You mean, so we realize that we have no idea why we do things," joked Yosuke.

Harry joined the laughter. "Well, I might not be able to explain some English customs, either. We just do what we're used to."

"And after less than a week, I've learned that their customs are very, very different from ours," put in Yasunori.

"No kidding," said Yosuke humorously. "I think Murata-san just found that out. Is that what you do when someone insults you?" he asked Harry.

"Well, we don't always have such a good chance," responded Harry. "Usually, bullies pick on someone they know can't fight back. Too bad for him he didn't bother to check first. But, yes, if someone attacks you, you let them know that it's not without a price. If we can possibly fight back, we do."

"But an insult is just words," said Yusuke, the quiet one.

"That's true, and if not for the match, I probably wouldn't have done anything. I wouldn't have gone looking for him. But I felt as though treating him with respect was far more than he deserved." He took another bite.

"Hey, you use chopsticks pretty well," observed Yosuke.

"He picked it up pretty fast," agreed Yasunori.

"It's not that difficult," said Harry. "Besides, some English use them, when eating Chinese food. Also, we have a Japanese restaurant or two in England."

"Did you ever use them before?" asked Yosuke.

"No," responded Harry, to chuckling. "But it's not that hard."

A first-year student a half a head shorter than Harry was suddenly standing at his left. "Excuse me," he said. "I'm Noboru Tachibana. It's nice to meet you."

Slightly baffled at the timing of the introduction, Harry nodded politely. "It's nice to meet you too, Noboru-san."

Noboru bowed. "Yoroshiku onegaishimasu."

Harry bowed in return, repeating the phrase. Noboru bowed once more, then went back to his seat at the other end of the table.

Wearing a puzzled expression, Harry noticed Yosuke and a few others suppressing laughter. One giggled, then they all did. "What was that?" asked Harry.

Yasunori explained. "As you said, Murata-san is basically a bully. Noboru is his favorite target, Murata-san often harasses him. Noboru was letting you know how much he enjoyed what you did."

"Well, let's be honest, we all enjoyed it," said Yosuke. "It's rare to see people get what they deserve."

Another student chimed in, "Well, if Murata-san asks me if I enjoyed it, I know what I'm going to say."

"No, sir, of course not, sir, it was terrible, sir," joked Yosuke, mimicking a frightened tone.

"Are you not going to say that?" asked the student.

"Well, he doesn't usually bother us," said Yosuke.

"Now, he might start," said Yosuke.

"That's a good point," put in Harry. "You guys, especially you," as he gestured to Yasunori, "might want to keep your distance from me for a few days, so you're not too associated with what I did."

Yasunori, Yosuke, and Yusuke traded looks for a few seconds. "It's nice of you to offer," said Yosuke. "But we've decided that no, we won't do that. We might not have done what you did, but we will cherish the memory for quite a long time. That's worth something."

Harry frowned. "You three just decided that?" Yosuke nodded. "But how did you decide? You didn't say a word to each other."

"We can read each other's minds," said Yosuke casually.

"Really?" asked Harry.

"No," answered Yosuke, who then smiled. Mildly annoyed, Harry grinned to let Yosuke know he took the joke as it was intended.

"Well, in a way, yes," said Yasunori. "We're fairly good at knowing what the others are thinking, without words. We can look at each other, and know. You don't have that in England?"

Harry shrugged. "I couldn't say it's impossible, but it isn't common. We usually use words, it makes things clearer."

"Ah, another cultural difference," said Yasunori; Harry wasn't sure whether he was joking. "Here, we say, 'silence is beautiful.'"

"My mother always says that," said Yosuke.

"Some English people say 'silence is golden,'" said Harry. "But most people don't follow it. I think people mainly say it when they want someone else to shut up."

Yasunori grinned at Yosuke. "That's why your mother says it, right?"

"Exactly," agreed Yosuke. "She'll say, why can't you be more like your friend Yusuke?"

"In England, Yusuke's mother would be asking why he can't be more like his friend Yosuke," said Harry.

Yosuke's eyes went wide. "Really?"

“Well, I’m joking a little, but basically, yes. In England, people who are outgoing, making jokes a lot, they’re pretty popular. Yasunori, you saw my friend’s ghost, how he acted. He was very popular, almost everyone liked him.”

As Yasunori told the story, everyone in hearing range reacted with shock. “He came out of a shrine making jokes?” asked a student. “Unbelievable!”

Harry told the table how Fred had died, then some of the ways Fred had woken him up in the days afterward; the story was greeted with amazement and laughter. “I do want to make clear, he’s pretty unusual, even for my country. He and his twin, their mother didn’t like it. But they were popular.”

“I knew I was born in the wrong country,” lamented Yosuke.

“We knew it too, Yo-kun,” joked Yasunori. “But we don’t like to mention it.” Interesting, thought Harry, Yasunori has a sense of humor. I don’t really see that at his home; he’s more serious there.

“Potter-san,” said a voice behind him. Harry looked up from his meal to see Okada, the school’s headmaster. “Would you come with me, please?”

Harry nodded and stood. As he turned to follow Okada, he heard an exclamation of surprise, and a student saying, “Don’t do that!” He wondered what it was, but of course there was no chance to ask.

Okada led Harry to a corner of the large hall. “Potter-san. I witnessed your duel with Murata-san earlier.” Harry nodded again, saying nothing.

“I am talking to you in this way so as to give students the impression that I am chastising you. In fact, I have nothing critical to say, except that your actions lacked subtlety and finesse. If you had done everything exactly the same, leaving out that one spell, your point would have been made, and arguably better. Too blunt an instrument can leave a mess.”

Harry decided to be honest and straightforward. "I understand, sir. But when someone has made his aggressive intentions so clear, you can't give any quarter, or they'll know you're weak. He deserved what I did."

"I would not argue with that," agreed the headmaster. "But that is not the point. Potter-san... you are the only wizard at this school who has had a wand pointed at him by a wizard who intended to kill him. I know you have fought many Dark wizards. But this is not that situation. Murata-san is not Voldemort, and your life is not in danger. It was not necessary to humiliate him."

"Do you think what he said this morning wasn't designed to humiliate me?"

"Yes, it was. But the scale is different, and that one spell was overkill. Again, I do not intend to berate you; you were greatly provoked. This is simply advice. Japanese admire restraint; we admire a measured response. Bullies are tolerated, but they are not respected. No doubt many students enjoyed what you did, because they have been harassed by him as well. But in adult society, what I am recommending you do will earn you more respect than doing what you did. You do not gain respect by sinking to the level of such a person. It is satisfying in the moment, but we think in the long term."

Harry could see the point; at the same time, he still felt he had a good reason for doing it. "I understand, sir."

Okada nodded. "One more thing. Bullies do not always remain bullies, and today's adversary can be tomorrow's friend. At least, that is to be hoped for. Another reason that such aggressive retaliation is frowned on is that one can create an enemy for life, and we strive to avoid that. If it is possible for you and Murata-san to make peace with each other, that would be a good thing."

Harry hated the idea, but again, he could see the point. "I understand, sir. I appreciate the advice, and I'll seriously consider it."

Okada nodded and bowed slightly. "Good day, Potter-san."

Harry bowed deeply, as he'd been taught to do for a person of high rank. "Good day, sir. Thank you very much."

Taking his seat again, Harry noticed that there was silence at that area of the table. "He gave me some advice," he reported, not intending to go into detail.

"Yo-kun, I'm going to tell him," said Yasunori sternly. Yosuke rolled his eyes a little, but offered no objection. Facing Harry, Yasunori said, "When you got up, Yosuke did a little spell he's known for; it landed on the back of your head, and it allows the person who did it to hear what you hear. He heard the whole conversation, and repeated it to us as it happened."

Yosuke gave Harry a sheepish look. "Sorry. I was just... extremely curious what he would say to you."

Harry sighed. "Well, I guess I can understand that, and I've done things like that before. But don't do it again," he added, mock-sternly.

"Oh, absolutely," said Yosuke. "My preferred position is standing on both feet."

Harry grinned. "So, what did you think of what he said?"

"I thought he would tell you to apologize to Murata-san," said Yasunori. "What he said was very reasonable. Some teachers are mindlessly strict, just spouting clichés. He didn't say anything about doing your best, following the rules of society, or respecting your elders. Some teachers can't get through a sentence without saying one of those things. But what he said was practical."

"But he hasn't been bullied for a very long time," argued Yosuke. "I think he's forgotten what it feels like."

"Yeah, but his whole point is that you don't let that control you," responded Yasunori. "That's what being a pre-adult is all about, thinking about things like an adult does."

“You’re too serious.”

“You’re not serious enough, so it balances out.” Yusuke quietly chuckled.

“I suppose this is a common theme with you two?” asked Harry.

“Yes, it’s one of the jokes we always make,” agreed Yasunori. “Another one is that when we disagree, one of us will say that Yusuke agrees with us. It’s a joke, because he’ll never say who he agrees with.”

“Or, sometimes, he’ll say, ‘I agree with both of you,’ even if we’ve taken completely opposite positions,” added Yosuke. “So, are you going to do anything about Murata-san?”

Interesting, thought Harry, how they dislike him, but still use the ‘san’ even when he can’t hear them. “Yeah, I suppose I should. If I apologize for what I did, do you think he’ll apologize to me for what he did?”

Every head in hearing range shook emphatically. “Not a chance,” said Yosuke.

“He’ll pocket your apology, and act like if you kiss his ass enough, he might just consider forgiving you,” added Yasunori. “But he won’t. He’ll just hold it over you, and expect you to take any abuse he dishes out.”

“Well, screw that,” muttered Harry. He looked at Yasunori quizzically. “You said, if I ‘kiss his ass’ enough...” Yasunori nodded. “Can you explain that phrase, using other words?”

“It means... there’s a way you bow, like samurai used to bow to their lords, where you’re kneeling and you bow so low your head touches the ground. He could cut it off if he wanted to; you’re defenseless. It’s like, you totally submit to the other person. I guess you don’t have that phrase. How did your device translate it?”

Harry explained the anatomical details, to the amusement and revulsion of the others. "What a disgusting phrase," exclaimed Yosuke.

"I may stop using the Japanese one, just because of how it translates," added Yasunori.

"I'm a little surprised it didn't use 'grovel,' said Harry. "That's pretty close."

"A little different, if it's giving this one right," said Yasunori. "What you just said is more like 'begging,' but the other one is more like 'submit' or 'capitulate.' It's a good translation, just... yucky."

"Well, anyway... I will go talk to him, but there'll be no ass-kissing or groveling." He stood, paused, and gestured to Yosuke. "You can do it this time, if you want," he said, gesturing to the back of his head. Yosuke grinned, and did the spell.

Harry walked over to the red table; he could feel all eyes on him, and conversations ceased, or became whispered. "Murata-san," said Harry, standing a few feet away.

Murata stood, wand in hand, and pointed it at Harry. "What do you want?" he asked rudely. Harry could see that he was still very angry.

Harry held up both hands briefly, to show that he was holding no wand. "Look... I wish this whole thing hadn't happened." That was as close as he would get to an apology, for now. "I hope we can make peace over it. So, what do you say, that we pretend nothing happened today, and start over, from the beginning."

Murata thought for a few seconds; the large room was almost totally quiet. "You have to apologize," he said brusquely.

"If I apologize, will you do so as well?"

"You must apologize! I am your senior!"

Harry tried to repress his annoyance. "Was it not explained to you that at this school, I am to be treated as no one's senior or junior, but as equal to all?"

"The headmaster told you to apologize!"

"You mean, you think he told me to apologize," corrected Harry, trying to keep the sarcasm out of his tone. "I don't think your hearing is quite that good. The headmaster is a wise man, and I respect him very much. Because I respect him, I will not discuss the contents of my conversation with him. But, if he tells me to do something, I will do it, yet here I stand, not yet having apologized. What does that tell you?"

"That you are not doing what he told you! Apologize!"

Harry paused, baffled. Is he not understanding anything I'm saying? "Do you want to talk to me, as an equal, to resolve this situation?"

Murata stared. Maybe he's just too angry right now, thought Harry.

"Well. If you change your mind, just let me know. I'm happy to talk. But you insulted me first, so I will not... kiss your ass." He walked away, and conversations started immediately. Over his shoulder, from the blue tables, he heard someone say, "If someone demolished me in a duel like that, I'd definitely treat him as an equal."

"Maybe as a senior," another said; Harry heard laughter. He reached his table and sat back down; all of the first years looked down the table at him. He looked up at Yosuke. "You heard?"

"Are you joking? Everyone in the cafeteria heard. The spell wasn't necessary."

Harry nodded. A few seconds of silence passed; everyone seemed to be waiting for him to say something. To Yosuke and Yasunori, he said, "The last thing I said, when I said I wouldn't kiss his ass... that did translate correctly, didn't it?"

Yosuke laughed. "Yes, it did," said Yasunori, as he and several others started to laugh as well.

Harry ate and chatted for the next ten minutes. Yosuke asked him about what Okada had said about Voldemort; Harry tried to answer vaguely, saying that England had been taken over by Dark wizards, and he and many others had taken up arms against them.

A first year came up to Harry, introduced himself, and said, "My older brother is a third year, and he gave me a message for you. Takenaka-san is outside the building, and would like to talk to you."

Oh, great, thought Harry. I guess I'd better do it. "Okay, thank you," he said, standing. Yosuke looked up at Harry, the question in his eyes. Harry chuckled a little, and nodded. He barely felt the spell hit him in the back of the head as he walked away.

Outside, he saw the tall, slim student waiting near a tree, obviously wanting no one in hearing range. Harry walked over. Harry introduced himself, and learned that Takenaka's first name was Akira.

"Potter-san," said Takenaka politely, "dueling is a hobby of mine, something I take rather seriously. So, please excuse my rudeness, but I feel it necessary to ask. Is what you did with Murata something that is commonly done in dueling, where you are from?"

Embarrassed, Harry responded, "No, it isn't. And I'd like to apologize, for causing you to have to worry about something like that."

Takenaka raised an eyebrow. "You would apologize to me, but not to him?"

"He doesn't deserve an apology," said Harry firmly, "until he takes responsibility for his own actions. But you do, because you have a point. I... simply got carried away in the heat of battle."

Takenaka scoffed lightly. "You mean, in the heat of anger. That was not a battle, that was a farce. He was not even close to being a match for you. I look forward to our match. Excuse me if this sounds arrogant, but I have not met a worthy opponent near my age for a long time."

“We have a saying: ‘it’s not boasting if it’s true.’”

Takenaka grinned. “We do not have that saying. For us, it is boasting even if it is true. Also, I would like to make clear that I would not object to that spell if its purpose was to win the duel. It is just that in your case, it was clearly not.”

Harry nodded. “Again, I apologize. Please accept my assurances that I will duel with the best sportsmanship, and any spell I do will be in an effort to win.”

“As it should be,” agreed Takenaka. “I thank you for talking to me.”

“It’s no problem, of course,” said Harry, bowing politely. “It was nice to meet you.”

“And you,” said Takenaka, bowing. As Harry walked away, Takenaka added, “Potter-san... I have dueled while angry before, and I must admit that I would be lying if said that I have never used my dueling skill in the service of that anger. It is a temptation I try very hard to resist. For reasons unrelated to me, you may want to do the same.”

“The headmaster said roughly the same thing. I thank you for the advice.” Takenaka nodded, and Harry returned to the cafeteria.

* * * * *

An hour later, they were in a large room that reminded Harry of a gymnasium, except that it too had tatami flooring. They really love that stuff, thought Harry. I guess older buildings are more likely to have it, and newer buildings have regular floors. All one hundred students attending the summer session were present, again viewing from the sidelines. Clearly, what would have been a routine practice event had now taken on great importance.

“I assume most people will be rooting for him,” said Harry.

“More than half, but not all,” said Yasunori. “Some people who enjoyed what you did to Murata would be happy to see you win. Also,

Takenaka is respected, but he isn't exactly popular. He does have a reputation for being a little arrogant, and he's not so socially adept. Most people supporting him will be supporting the Japanese against the foreigner. If you beat him, some people would worry that all foreigners are better than all Japanese, and they wouldn't want to think that."

Having read fifty pages so far of the Stanton book, Harry recalled reading that Japanese had strong national pride, which could be easily bruised if they perceived that they were inferior to foreigners in some way. "They couldn't just assume that I don't necessarily represent all foreigners?"

"They don't know that you've fought Dark wizards," pointed out Yasunori.

"Well, let's hope that doesn't get around," muttered Harry.

"Don't worry," Yasunori assured him. "It probably won't."

As Yasunori spoke, the contestants were called to their places. I hope he was joking with that 'probably,' thought Harry as he stood in his assigned place. He bowed; Takenaka did as well.

The bout started much differently than the others had. Takenaka sent out spells cautiously, obviously not going all out, seeing what Harry had to offer. Having been advised about this tactic by the 'other life' Aurors, Harry did the same in return. As Harry had heard, Takenaka moved around, but Harry soon saw a pattern: he blocked few spells, mostly managing to get out of the way of the incoming spells, sometimes by the slimmest of margins. Usually, no one let such a close spell go unblocked, because one couldn't be certain whether it would hit. Suddenly it dawned on Harry: Takenaka can see spells, too! No wonder he's so good. I'm going to have to bear down, and raise my game.

A tactic came to Harry's mind: mix up the speed of the spells. Deciding to rely for a few seconds on dodging incoming spells, Harry sent a few slower spells in a row, then a sinker. Clearly deciding to block it, Takenaka appeared stunned to find it suddenly at his feet. As

Takenaka tried to hop over the spell, he lost his balance enough for Harry's next Stunner to find its target, and he flew ten feet backwards. The students gasped, having seen Takenaka lose a bout for the first time.

Takenaka slowly got to his feet, stretched his arms and legs, and stepped back into the dueling area. In the second bout, Takenaka was more cautious, blocking more spells, and clearly not assuming that a spell would not suddenly change direction. He fired a few spells that missed Harry by very little; Harry wondered if it was intentional, to see if Harry had the same ability he did. Harry moved aside, and as he did, another strategy from the Aurors came to his mind.

Deciding to again not block spells for a short time, Harry fired hard Stunners as fast as he could, towards the center; Takenaka moved to his left. Harry kept firing, a few inches to the right each time; accuracy was extremely important, as he had to dodge a few incoming spells. After a few seconds, he had pushed Takenaka almost all the way to the right. He now fired one straight at Takenaka, who now had no choice but to go to his left; Harry fired Stunners in the place Takenaka would be going, and again, Takenaka couldn't block well enough or fast enough. He blocked a little, but was pushed out of the playing area. The score was two to zero.

Taking a deep breath, Takenaka resumed his position once more. For the next bout, Takenaka was even more cautious, being sure to stay near the center, and not be pushed to any side. Twenty seconds in, to Harry's shock, one of Takenaka's spells seemed to split in two from his wand, heading both to his left and his right; he didn't want to try to block it, because it was coming from two directions. It looked like it would miss on both sides, but suddenly, both arced in, towards him. He darted to one side, but it was too late. One side of the spell seemed to push him into the other, and it spun him around; he felt as if he were a top that someone had spun. He stumbled out of the dueling area, spinning four or five times, and hit the floor hard as the audience gasped again.

Wow, the Aurors never taught me that one, thought Harry. I'd love to learn it. Harry slowly stood and entered the dueling area, trying to think about how to deal with that last spell; a combination of dodging

and blocking was the best he could think of. He needed an unfamiliar spell, and again reached back into his Auror-related memories.

Ten seconds into the next bout, he had decided to use a different spell when he saw another split spell on the way; he quickly moved to one side, but found that due to the unfamiliarity of the spell, he had mis-gauged its direction; Takenaka had actually aimed it to Harry's left, anticipating that he would dodge, and correctly guessing the direction. Crap, thought Harry, as he threw up a blocking spell that he knew wouldn't be enough. On a desperate impulse as the spell hit, he lunged forward, hoping not to be spun out of the dueling area. He was again spun, but was able to keep his balance a little better, as he was ready for it. Still, he had soon been pushed to the back of the dueling area, tipping, about to fall out...

Knowing he couldn't keep his balance, he improvised and jumped straight up on one foot; luckily, Takenaka's next spell had been at his feet anyway, so it missed. Harry quickly did a Hover Charm on himself, and facing one side and floating, aimed across his body and fired a spell that dissipated and got wider as it approached its target. It usually couldn't knock the opponent out of the dueling area, but it was distracting. It was also slow, so Harry could fire two Stunners before the dissipating spell finally arrived. The Hover Charm quickly weakening, Harry floated to the ground, but not before one of the Stunners found its mark, knocking Takenaka out of the dueling area as he tried to escape the dissipating spell. Harry hit the ground only a second after Takenaka. The third-year professor pointed at Harry, declaring him the winner. The audience applauded vigorously.

Slowly getting to his feet, Harry was surprised that his aim had been that good while floating. Guess it's like Dad said, he thought, you'll be all right if you don't think about it. He felt the sadness he always did when he thought about his parents, but it also occurred to him that at least now he had memories of his parents. He had paid far too high a price for those memories, but it was better than nothing, he supposed. He reached the dueling area at the same time as Takenaka; they both bowed deeply.

A few minutes later, Harry was accepting congratulations from first years when Takenaka approached him and requested a few words

with him. This time keeping an eye on Yosuke and making sure he didn't use the eavesdropping spell, Harry and Takenaka walked to a spot out of everyone's hearing.

"Congratulations," said Takenaka. "That was... remarkable."

Harry shrugged. "Well, you try strange things when you're desperate."

"If I had been in your position, I would have lost the bout," admitted Takenaka. "It would never have occurred to me to do what you did. Also, I could not help but notice... you have the Gift."

Harry frowned; a translation problem? "I'm sorry, I don't know what that means."

"You can see spells," explained Takenaka.

"Ah, yes. I noticed you could, too. How common is that?"

"Extremely rare, from what I hear," said Takenaka. "My grandfather can do it, and his grandfather can, so it seems to skip generations. How about you?"

"I... never knew either of my grandparents," said Harry. "I don't know where it comes from." Of course he knew he couldn't tell the truth.

"Have you not asked them as honored spirits?"

"There are very few ghosts in my country; we don't have the custom of staying around for three generations. We just move on to the next place."

Takenaka's eyebrows went high. "Very interesting. Do you know why?"

"Well, to be honest, my understanding is that moving on is the natural thing to do. So, I might just as easily ask you why yours don't move on."

"Because of the Antiquity Link."

“Yes, I know, but my point is that the Antiquity Link isn’t natural. My country doesn’t have it, and without it, almost everyone who dies moves on immediately. So, that’s why I think moving on immediately is ‘natural.’ It’s what would happen without any artificial action, like the Antiquity Link.”

Takenaka slowly nodded. “I had never thought of it that way before, that the Antiquity Link is somehow not natural. Of course you are right, according to your meaning. We simply take it for granted. No doubt there are many other differences between our countries.”

“Almost too many to mention,” agreed Harry.

“Yes. Well, to get back to the point... I would like to ask you, what part of my dueling technique do you feel needs improvement?”

“Blocking,” Harry immediately answered. “I think you’re so used to dodging that your blocking isn’t as good as it could be. Sometimes blocking is preferable to dodging.”

“As you very nicely demonstrated in the second bout,” agreed Takenaka. “I was impressed with how quickly you found a tactical weakness, and exploited it. Of course, your Stunning spells are more powerful than most; it takes a concentrated effort to block them. Which I discovered, too late. But the last part of the final bout... you cannot possibly have practiced that?”

Harry smiled at the thought. “No. Just... desperation, improvisation.”

“Creativity,” mused Takenaka. “Spontaneity. Qualities that, I believe, are more valued in your culture than mine.”

“Do you know much about my culture?”

“My mother is Muggle-born,” responded Takenaka. He said it casually, but Harry detected the undertone of someone having made an admission that had not always been met with favor. “She is most interested in all things foreign, both Muggle-related and wizard-related. My parents have friends abroad, including in England and

America. So, I am familiar with some basic cultural differences, though I did not know about your lack of Antiquity Links.

“In any case... we value a ‘right way’ of doing things, and anything unconventional tends to be looked down on. Because my style is unconventional, I am not much respected for my ability.”

“Well, you’re respected by me, at least,” said Harry wryly. “I hope I can play against you again sometime.”

“Actually, that is part of why I wanted to talk to you. I think you and I could learn a lot from each other. If you are interested, I would suggest we meet after lessons, say once a week, to have practice sessions. A good sparring partner is essential for improving.”

Harry smiled. “That sounds really good.” They agreed on a time and place, then Takenaka lowered his voice and said, “Potter-san... I trust everything we have discussed will remain confidential, but particularly about the Gift. I would not wish that to be common knowledge. Here, being different is not a good thing, sometimes even if that difference is a positive one.”

“I know all about that,” muttered Harry. “Of course, I won’t repeat anything.”

“Thank you. When I tell my parents about you, my mother will want to call her friends in England. Perhaps her friend will know of you.”

Harry couldn’t stop a chuckle. “Yeah, I think so. Look, do me a favor. I’d appreciate it if your mother didn’t say anything specifically about where I am, and if you didn’t repeat to anyone what your mother’s friend tells her about me.”

Puzzled, Takenaka asked, “You are sure my mother’s friend will know of you?”

“Yes, she will. It’s a long story, and nothing bad, just nothing I want to get around here. You’ll understand after your mother talks to her friend. It’s more about privacy than anything else.”

Takenaka nodded. "Of course. I will see you on Wednesday, and thank you again for the match."

"My pleasure." They bowed, and Takenaka surprised Harry by offering his hand. "I believe they do this in your country?"

Grinning, Harry shook it. "Yes, we do."

* * * * *

Harry and Yasunori returned home at four o'clock; Harry read his book until five-thirty, when Sato arrived home. Ten minutes later, Yasunori knocked on Harry's door and asked him to come out to the living room. Harry followed him, and they sat on the sofa, opposite Sato.

"Well, Harry-san... I heard about your day."

"Ah. Sorry about that. How much trouble did I cause?"

"I just spent two hours in a meeting with the Foreign Minister, the Deputy Culture Minister, the Education Minister, the headmaster, and three teachers from the school."

Yasunori and Harry exchanged surprised glances. "Wow," exclaimed Yasunori. "Why all that? It wasn't such a big deal."

"Given the positions of the people involved, clearly, it was," said his father dryly. "I know it may not seem that way, to you and Harry-san, but such a disruptive day had not occurred at the school for many years." He paused, then shook his head. "Harry-san, I know I do not need to give you a talk about fitting in. Of course I know what Murata-san said to you in the morning, and it was inexcusable. The fact is that a student who was Japanese and knew that spell might well have done what you did, and it would not have been anywhere near the problem it was in this case. Ironically, the fact that you are foreign is what makes it a problem. That is not fair, but it is the reality."

"All three teachers disapproved of the headmaster's instructions that you be treated as equal to all years' students. They did not say it

directly, but they made it clear nonetheless. They disapproved because it throws a wrench into the well-ordered social structure that we have built.”

“Why is that so difficult?” wondered Yasunori. “Harry-san is equal to everyone. It seems clear enough.”

“Of course, I agree,” responded his father. “I am just saying why they disapprove. For example, the second year professor protested that when Murata-san insulted Harry-san, he had not yet been told about Harry-san’s unique situation, and as Harry-san was wearing yellow, he had license to consider himself Harry-san’s senior. Essentially, he feels that the rules were changed in the middle of the game. He claimed he was not defending Murata-san’s insult, but pointing out that Harry-san would not have felt free to punish Murata-san as he did had Harry-san been socially equal to first years.”

“Does he really think I wouldn’t have done what I did if I was socially equal to a first year?” asked a surprised Harry. “That had nothing to do with it.”

“I know that, of course, but he is thinking from a Japanese perspective. In his mind, if you were equal to a first year, you would not have done it because such flagrant disrespect and aggression against a senior would be punishable by his entire class. You would have been harassed and ostracized, and any first year who defended you would have as well. He—the professor—actually thinks that you took advantage of your flexible social status to commit an otherwise unpardonable act; because you are equal even to a third year, no one can punish you. Therefore, he feels, you have been made de facto a third year.”

Harry sighed. “This has to be the weirdest thing I’ve ever heard. Let me see if I understand this. If I was a first year, he could recruit his classmates and punish me. If I was a third year, he couldn’t do anything. What if I was a second year?”

“Then it would depend on your relative social status. If he had higher status within the group than you, he could punish you, though your fighting back would be allowable. If yours was higher, he would not

try to fight you because he could not succeed. Ironically, Murata-san later claimed that his insult was directed at Yasunori, not at you.”

Harry and Yasunori exchanged a look of amazement. “Okay, now that’s the weirdest thing I’ve ever heard,” said Harry, shaking his head.

“Father, that claim is utterly ridiculous. Perhaps it was aimed slightly at me, but Harry-san was the target. Every student knew that. That claim is nothing but tatemae.”

Surprised that his translator didn’t get the word, Harry decided to try to remember it. “Of course, Yasu-kun, I am aware of that. That is the point of tatemae, that in a polite situation, one cannot simply say, ‘that is tatemae.’ But I think everyone in the room knew that is was.”

“But why even make such an absurd claim?” asked Harry.

Sato gestured to his son, asking him to answer the question. Yasunori thought for a few seconds, then understood. “If it was only an insult to me, then Harry’s attack on him was unprovoked.” Sato nodded. “Father, may I have permission to tell students around the school that Murata-san said this? It would get a big laugh.”

Sato seemed annoyed with his son. “Yasunori, you know that everything I tell you from work is confidential. However, I take your point, and it may get around without your assistance. Speaking of keeping things confidential, I am sure it will amuse you to know that the headmaster reprimanded the second-year professor, saying that Murata-san’s conduct did not reflect well on the professor, the headmaster, or the school, and that they should be apologizing to the Foreign Ministry instead of complaining that we have disrupted their school.”

“Well, now I respect the headmaster even more,” remarked Yasunori.

Sato nodded. Looking at Harry, he said, “He also pointed out that you took his advice and attempted to make peace with Murata-san, praising your use of the phrase ‘I wish it hadn’t happened,’ which is understood in Japanese as a pre-apology, an offer to apologize under

appropriate conditions. He appreciates that you offered Murata-san a face-saving way out of the situation, though he recognizes that Murata-san was probably too emotional, so soon after the incident, to think clearly.

“In the final analysis... the headmaster, at lunch, instructed the professors to remain silent to the students regarding the incident; that will remain in force. This will now be treated as a social matter to be resolved by the students, with no staff guidance or interference. Yasu-kun, how is the situation seen around the school?”

“Hmmm... of course, all students recognize Harry-san’s actions as being unusually... emphatic, and either would not have been done by a Japanese student, or would only have been done as punishment for a grievous offense. First years are pleased—after all, many have been bullied by him—but trying not to be too open about it, fearing retaliation from Murata-san or other second years. The general feeling is that Murata-san is a foolish bully who got what he deserved. Second years, I hear, are mostly angry; not because they like Murata-san, but because first years are getting satisfaction at the humiliation of a second year by one who was seen as a first year. A few were heard to say that the insult didn’t deserve such heavy punishment. And the third years don’t care so much, since it doesn’t involve them. They apparently think it’s funny, but of course, they were the only ones not to see it directly. I think it feels different if you have. They were more impressed with Harry-san’s defeat of Takenaka-san, who everyone expects to make Auror in the future. Also, since Takenaka-san is seen as kind of arrogant, the fact that after the match he treated Harry-san as an equal, with respect, is significant to them.”

“Wow... you sure got a lot of information fast,” said Harry to Yasunori.

“I talked to a few people, who had talked to other people. This was a big event, so everyone wanted to know how everyone felt. It was like a social earthquake, and we don’t know if there’ll be more aftershocks.”

Sato nodded. “An excellent analogy, Yasunori.”

Yasunori smiled. "Thank you, Father. One more thing: a feeling shared by pretty much everyone, about Harry-san, was along the lines of, 'I'm definitely not going to mess with him.'"

Sato eyed Harry. "Is that what you had in mind?"

"I didn't care what other people thought. What I had in mind was that he should think that."

"I have only one more question, Harry-san," said Sato gravely. "If you had it to do again, what would you do?"

Harry paused for what felt like a long time, thinking it over. Finally, he had an answer. "It would be very difficult to resist, but no, I wouldn't do it. I would look for something else to get across the same message... but with a scalpel rather than a sledgehammer."

Sato nodded. "In that case, today has been a valuable learning experience."

Harry stood. "I'm sorry if it caused you any problems."

"It has been a learning experience for us, as well. It may yet, I hope, be one for Murata-san. Only he can decide that, however."

Harry nodded, left the room, and walked to his bedroom, but paused near the bedroom door as he heard voices from the living room. I should stop listening like this, he thought, but he continued to listen.

"Yasu-kun, I'm sure you are aware that you are standing near the epicenter."

"I know, Father. But I'm not moving."

There was a pause. "You're a good boy."

"I'm eighteen, Father."

"My father would occasionally say that I was a good boy. The last time he did... I was forty-two years old."

“I understand, Father. Thank you.”

Harry felt a pang, wishing his father were around to say that kind of thing. Well, he thought, at least I got to hear it once. Not nearly enough, but... wonder what an epicenter is, anyway. Must be one of those things, like filial piety, that they talk about but we don't.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 16, Gaman: Slowly settling into a new school and a new culture, Harry tries to defend himself from a bully while not aggravating the situation, and tries to understand culture and customs he finds unfathomable.

From Chapter 16: Bewildered, Harry was mute for a few seconds. Finally, he exclaimed incredulously, ‘What’s the point of that?’

“To endure,” said Yusuke earnestly. Again, ‘gaman’ came out. “To show that we can, and to fly in formation under adverse circumstances.”

Again, there was silence as Harry looked back and forth at the other three. He shook his head. “You people are absolutely crazy.”

Chapter 16

Gaman

Tuesday was calm at school. The classes were unremarkable, there were no student demonstrations of anything, and Harry didn't see Murata, except from a distance, at lunch. The first years were generally friendly and polite to him, and he spent most of the day with Yasunori, Yosuke, and Yusuke.

Wednesday was similar; Harry wasn't learning much of substance from the classes, but he was getting a better understand of Japanese culture and how it affected how they did magic. He found that between classes, he was often asking his new friends why this or that spell was done this or that way, and he realized that culture actually had a lot to do with how magic was done. Such a thought would never have occurred to him before.

After the last lesson, it was only fifteen minutes until Harry's appointment with Takenaka, who had asked to meet Harry in a relatively secluded spot. "He probably doesn't want anyone watching the two of you," said Yasunori as he walked with Harry to the meeting point to be sure Harry found it.

"But not because I'm a foreigner, right?" asked Harry.

"I don't think so, since the whole school saw him shake your hand after you talked. He said he takes dueling seriously, so I'd guess he just doesn't want what you learn from each other to get out. If it wasn't in this kind of place, you might get an audience, which he doesn't want."

"Can't say I'd be too crazy about it either, so it suits me fine."

"Were you going to ask me something? Just when the last lesson started?"

Harry paused to remember. "Oh, yeah. The professor had said earlier in the day that next week, we'd start working on group spells. I

wanted to ask more about that. In England, we don't have group spells, so I don't know how that works."

Yasunori's mouth hung open. "You don't have group spells? Unbelievable!"

Harry grinned. "You know, I'm starting to learn the Japanese word for 'unbelievable,' since people around me keep saying it. It's 'shinjinai,' right?"

"Close. It's 'shinjirarenai,' but we usually say it fast, so it would sound like what you said. 'Shinjiru' is 'believe,' and—"

"Nai' makes something negative," finished Harry. "I've figured that much out. Anyway, no, we really don't. I think people in England would be equally amazed that you do have group spells. How do they work?"

Yasunori grunted. "I was going to say that it's not something I can explain in a few minutes, but it may be that I can't explain it at all. We start learning it in first year of the regular magic school."

"Well, it'll be interesting to see how I do with that. Probably not very well, since I've never done it before."

"After what you did this week, everyone'll be watching you, to see how you do."

"But, hey, no pressure," Harry muttered.

Yasunori looked at him quizzically. "I think there's a translation problem. What you said was that you shouldn't worry, but what I said before that kind of suggested that you should worry. So..."

Harry chuckled; it seemed like at least ten cultural differences came up every day. "I was using... sarcasm isn't quite the right word, it's too strong... oh, yeah, I was being facetious. Does that translate?"

Yasunori nodded. "Yeah, it does, but it's something we hardly ever do. Well, Yosuke does it occasionally, but he's unusual. Is it common in England?"

"Yeah, pretty common. I'd ask you why you don't do it, but you probably don't know."

"No, I don't. You should probably ask my father—"

Yasunori cut himself off as Harry looked to their right and saw, twenty meters away, Murata and three of his friends heading towards them. Harry didn't know if they'd seen Yasunori. "Go, get out of here," he urged Yasunori.

"No, I'm staying," said Yasunori.

"Yasunori, come on," insisted Harry. "I told you I don't want anything happening to you because of me."

"So, I should run away while you're in danger? Would you do that?"

"I'm not in danger! I can kick their asses!" Harry whispered; Murata and the others were less than ten meters away.

"Then it's no problem," pointed out Yasunori.

Harry rolled his eyes, wanting to argue further, but knowing there was no time. He turned to Murata and the others, suddenly remembering Malfoy, always looking so smug with Crabbe and Goyle. Except here, he thought, I have overwhelming advantages that they don't know about. My challenge isn't defeating them, it's doing it without giving in to the temptation to humiliate them like I did last time. Of course, beating four of them is going to humiliate them, but there's not much I can do about that.

They stopped five meters away, at approximate dueling distance. Harry decided to pretend that it was a chance encounter. "Murata-san, what a surprise to meet you here. I'm afraid I haven't been introduced to your friends."

“Potter. Apologize!”

Not looking at Yasunori, Harry whispered to him, “Now, here’s where I would usually be using sarcasm.” To Murata, he responded, “Well, as I said before, that’s something we need to discuss. For example, are you willing to admit that you provoked me?”

“I am willing to listen to you apologize.”

“Well, see, we can’t have a discussion if you keep saying the same thing all the time,” said Harry, unable to resist a little sarcasm. “Look, if you’ll just put your wands down and discuss this, it’ll be better for everyone.”

One of Murata’s friends wore a smug grin. “Why would it be better for us?”

At least they won’t be able to say I didn’t warn them, thought Harry. “Because I’m going to beat the four of you, and that’ll be a little embarrassing for me, but much more for you. So, I really hope you’ll agree to discuss this. I don’t want it to get worse than it already is.”

One of the four looked as if he might have believed Harry, but the others chuckled. “Whatever caused that scar must have addled your brain,” cracked one.

Harry grinned. “It did, actually, for a while. But I’m better now. C’mon, think about it. You don’t want to be known for losing this bout. We’ll talk about it, we’ll both apologize, we’ll shake hands, or bow, or whatever it is you do, everything’ll be okay. How about it?”

Murata pointed his wand at Harry; his friends did so as well. The way in which they were pointed reminded Harry of how the Japanese Aurors had pointed their wands when they’d captured him a week ago. Harry realized that this must be a group spell, which would probably make a circle and immobilize anything inside it. Knowing there were probably several ways to stop or disrupt it, he chose the one that came to his mind first.

“One, two...” counted Murata; clearly, the spell would be cast on three.

“Expecto Patronum!”

“Three!”

Magic shot out of the four wands as Harry’s stag burst forward from his wand and dashed toward the spot where the four spells were meeting. The four spells seemed to be making a twisting motion, like a corkscrew. Harry wondered if they would meet and twist as one, but he never got the chance to find out. The stag plowed into the spells, not blocking them, but disrupting them and sending them on different paths. Harry was able to step out of the way easily.

The stag continued forward, straight for Murata. Four pairs of eyes became very wide as they scrambled out of the way, two heading left and two right, in rather undignified fashion. Wow, that was too easy, thought Harry. I didn’t think they’d panic at that.

He almost ran forward to get a better shot, but decided that he didn’t want to take their attention away from the Patronus and onto him. His first Full-Body Bind found its target, and Murata’s arms clamped to his sides; he toppled over onto his back. The others were just starting to notice this when Harry’s second shot hit another one; the Patronus was now well past them, it had to be becoming clear to the others that it had never been a threat. Harry now ran forward; he quickly took out the third as the fourth started to run away. However, he ran straight, making it easier for Harry to hit him; he should have swerved around while running, thought Harry. Soon he was down as well.

Harry sighed, and turned to look for Yasunori, who seemed to be gone. Where is he? Did he run off after all? Harry then heard an odd, high-pitched noise coming from behind a nearby bush; he couldn’t say what it was, except that it was a human voice. Walking over, he saw Yasunori crouching behind the bush with his back towards Harry, rocking forward, torso and head moving up and down quickly, supporting himself with his right hand on the ground.

Wondering if Yasunori had panicked too, Harry walked around and crouched in front of Yasunori. "Yasunori, it's..."

Seeing Yasunori's face, Harry understood: Yasunori was laughing hysterically, trying desperately to stifle the sound. He took a deep breath, now holding his stomach. "Oh, my God... that was so funny... couldn't let them see or hear me, but oh, my... their faces..." He burst into another fit of silent laughter.

"Yeah, I guess it was kind of funny," Harry agreed, keeping his voice low. "Too bad it wasn't a tiger. They would've had to change their underwear."

Yasunori laughed yet again. "Oh, Harry, don't do that, I'm trying to stop."

"Sorry," Harry grinned. He waited silently for another minute while Yasunori brought himself under control. Suddenly realizing there was another way, Harry pointed his wand at his fallen adversaries and said, "Muffliato." Turning to Yasunori, he added, "They can't hear us now."

Yasunori stood, exhaling heavily a few times; he finally seemed to be getting over it. Just then, Harry saw someone approaching from the direction in which he'd been headed.

"Potter-san, I can see that it's going to be very interesting to practice with you. Clearly, one can never know what to expect."

Yasunori stood straight, almost coming to attention; Harry smiled. "How are you doing, Takenaka-san?"

"Takenaka-san, I am Yasunori Sato. I am very pleased to meet you," said Yasunori, bowing deeply. Harry realized that the reason for the excessive (to him) formality was the two-year difference in their ages.

Takenaka nodded politely, but clearly felt that the gap in their ages meant he wasn't obliged to return the introduction. "I am well, thank you," he responded to Harry. "To be honest, I was disappointed with that. Like Sato, I did feel it was quite funny, but I had hoped to see

how you would deal with the four of them in a more... conventional way. Did you do that with the intent to embarrass them?"

Harry sighed, hoping he hadn't just made things worse. "No, I didn't. It was just what came to me. I think any way I won was going to embarrass them pretty bad."

"That is true," agreed Takenaka. "Are you going to return their wands?"

"I don't understand."

"There is a custom in schools," explained Takenaka, "that if someone attacks you in a way that is inappropriate—for example, a junior attacking a senior, or a group attacking an individual, as was the case here—if you wish, you can take your attacker's wand and deliver it to the headmaster. The main purpose is to bring the matter to the headmaster's attention; the purpose of bringing the wands is to force the attackers to go to the headmaster to retrieve their wands. When you deliver them, the headmaster may ask you questions under verification about what happened. If the headmaster is satisfied that your actions were appropriate, when your attackers report, he will do the same with them, then take whatever action he feels is appropriate. For what it is worth, I would advise you to do so."

"Why?" asked Harry.

"Who knows what they will say to other students," replied Takenaka. "They could say, for example, that you attacked them with a conjured wild animal, or other such fabrications. Doing as I suggest will make the facts known, at least to the headmaster."

Harry paused. "I understand, but I'm just afraid of making this any worse. I'd just ignore this if I thought it would be the end of it, but it may not be. Yasunori, what do you think I should do?"

Slightly startled to be asked, Yasunori immediately answered, "I agree with Takenaka-san. In addition to what he said, there is the fact that... this is another aftershock. My father would think it's very

important that the authorities know all the facts of every incident, so they can respond appropriately.”

Again, Harry sighed. “I suppose I can’t argue with that. I’m sorry, Takenaka-san, our practice will have to wait a bit. Would you like to walk with me to the headmaster’s office?”

Takenaka nodded. “I was a witness, so it is appropriate that I go.”

“But you,” Harry said, pointing at Yasunori, “get out of here, don’t let anyone know you were here, and go home. Okay?”

Yasunori looked slightly offended. “Harry, you and I are equals at this school. You don’t have the authority to order me.”

“I don’t say it as your senior. I say it as someone who’s worried about your safety; I don’t want you in danger because of something I did. In my culture, we sometimes speak emphatically like that to friends when we’re worried about them.”

Yasunori’s expression softened. “I understand, but I make my own choices. If I suffer for them, it’s not in any way your fault. Do you understand?”

“Okay. But could you please do what I said?”

Yasunori grinned. “I’ll think about it.” With a bow to Takenaka, Yasunori walked off in the direction of the Portkey stations.

Harry walked over to the fallen attackers and relieved them of their wands. He considered taking advantage of Murata’s immobile state to once again ask him to consider making peace, but decided against it; if Murata hadn’t listened before, he probably wouldn’t listen now. He and Takenaka headed towards the castle and the headmaster’s office, which was on the seventh floor.

“Sorry about all this,” said Harry, glancing back at Murata and the others; the spell should be wearing off in about twenty minutes, Harry estimated.

“Again, you apologize to me, not to him,” Takenaka observed.

“Yeah, I’m funny like that.”

Takenaka gave him a sideways glance. “Either that phrase did not translate well, or you said something very peculiar.”

“Well, I did say something peculiar, to you, at least. We often make small jokes, or not-so-serious comments. We like to be spontaneous.”

“Were you being spontaneous,” asked Takenaka casually, “when you decided to break into an extremely high-security vault?”

Ah, so he’s heard. “No, but I was being spontaneous when my friends and I hopped on a dragon to get out of there. That wasn’t part of the plan.” Takenaka offered no immediate response. “Now, do you know why I don’t want this getting around?”

“Of course,” Takenaka agreed. “My mother’s English friend spent over an hour talking about you. I would not wish to be a household word, as apparently you are. I can see the appeal of going someplace where I was not known.”

Harry grunted. “Now I’m famous here, just for a different reason. I wish I hadn’t done that damn spell to Murata. Not that I feel bad for embarrassing him, but all it did was make me the center of attention.”

Takenaka shook his head. “You would have been anyway. It was the fact of your foreignness that inspired Murata’s insult, because as a foreigner, you are different, and stand out. Japanese are uncomfortable with what is different, and strive to not stand out. You would have drawn much attention had you been as meek as a rabbit, and Murata would not have been the only one to harass you. At least after what happened, no one else will try.”

“Let me ask you something. If you were me, would you apologize?”

“No,” responded Takenaka instantly.

Harry was surprised. “You answered that awfully quickly.”

"I have thought about it, and also, I told my mother about these events after her phone call. She was appalled at Murata's insult, feeling it reflected badly on all Japanese, and hoped you would not reach broad conclusions about us. Murata's insult... let me ask you a question. In your country, are you more polite to strangers than to friends and family?"

"Yes, we are."

"As are we; it is very natural. Directed at a Japanese, say, a new student, Murata's insult would be crude, stupid, and socially insensitive even if the student were younger. Directed at a foreigner, by definition a guest in Japan, it is rudeness of the highest order. To apologize without reciprocation would essentially say that there was nothing wrong with what he did. Also, to apologize now would be to give in to bullying and intimidation. Based on your past, it is easy to guess that you would find that unacceptable."

They had arrived at the castle, and they started up the wooden steps. "They should put an elevator in here," Harry joked.

"I have to make this walk every day, of course," responded Takenaka. "If they hear anyone complaining about it, they say it is good for our physical condition. By the way, how did you do with that yesterday?"

Harry chuckled; his class had, to his surprise, spent three hours the day before focusing on physical fitness. "Poorly. As I explained to my classmates, who thought it was very funny, my school didn't emphasize physical fitness at all. There were only two students in worse shape than me, and I'm not in terrible shape or anything. They've just been practicing, and I haven't."

"Indeed, I can hear that you are out of breath already," said an amused Takenaka, as they reached the fifth floor.

"Was kind of busy last year," huffed Harry. "Fighting Dark wizards... breaking into vaults... escaping capture... not much time for exercise."

“Instead of making an excuse, it is better to vow that you will not need to make the excuse in the future.”

“Is that a Japanese proverb?”

“Yes, it is. It was meant in humor.”

Harry chuckled, breathing heavily. “Yeah, I get it. It would... probably be funnier... when you know the proverb.”

“Undoubtedly,” agreed Takenaka. They had reached the top floor, and walked down the hall to the headmaster’s office, in one of the corners. To Harry’s surprise, the door was open, and unlike at Hogwarts, no guard existed.

“Headmaster,” said Harry from the doorway.

Okada motioned them in. “Potter-san, Takenaka-san. What brings you here?”

Harry told the story, trying to include as much pertinent detail as possible. After he finished, he handed over the wands; Takenaka explained that he had witnessed the altercation from a distance.

“Ah, Potter-san,” exhaled Okada. “This does not bring me great joy.”

Harry appreciated the understated humor, but kept the smile off his face. “No, sir, I wouldn’t think so.”

“What is the intended purpose of the spell which creates the image of the animal?”

Harry explained; seeing their blank looks, he added, “Don’t you have dementors here?”

Takenaka shook his head. “I have heard legends of such creatures,” said the headmaster. “But they are very old legends, and cannot be taken literally. If such creatures ever existed in Japan, they abandoned it long ago.”

“I see. Well, anyway, I used the spell here because it was pretty guaranteed to mess them up, but not actually hurt them.”

“I do not think they will appreciate your consideration,” said Okada dryly. “They would no doubt rather be injured than embarrassed in such a way. Potter-san, I am sure that you are telling me the truth, but when they come to retrieve their wands, I would like to be able to tell them I know the story, and that you swore it was true under Verification. Will you agree to do so?”

“I’m sorry, what is Verifica—oh, is it that white thing?”

Okada had pulled it out of a drawer. “Yes, the white thing.” Takenaka grinned, apparently at Harry’s inelegant description.

“Yeah, sure,” agreed Harry, reaching for it. Harry answered a few questions, then gave it back to Okada, who apologized for asking him to use it. “I will urge Murata to talk to you, and make peace on terms involving an apology on both parts,” said Okada. “And I will strongly urge him not to attempt any further attacks on you.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Harry, wondering if in this case, ‘urge’ was simply a polite way of saying ‘order.’ He and Takenaka finally went off to practice.

* * * * *

As Harry expected, Sato was unhappy to hear about what had happened; again, he had heard about it at the office rather than from Harry. Harry knew that Okada had been requested by the Foreign Ministry to promptly report any incidents involving Harry, and that the Culture Ministry had requested to be informed as well. Sato didn’t say it directly, but Harry got the impression that the Culture Ministry was more or less saying ‘we told you so’ every time there was an incident involving Harry. Sato explained to Harry that a substantial part of the problem was that the Patronus was such an unfamiliar spell, and that some Japanese didn’t react well to what was unfamiliar.

Part of Harry was surprised—life is full of unfamiliar things, after all—and part felt that he shouldn’t be surprised. Through many

conversations, incidents, and experiences, Harry was beginning to form a broad picture of Japanese life and people. He felt that for the Japanese, it must be very comfortable: nothing surprising or unfamiliar, well-understood rules, formality, rituals, and safety. But for him, it would be smothering. It stifled individuality, creativity, initiative, and diverse opinion. In one dinnertime conversation, he told the Satos about house-elves—as it turned out, the Japanese didn't have them, and had only vaguely heard of them—and then told them about Hermione's S.P.E.W. campaign at Hogwarts. He explained that nobody had cared or paid much attention, but nobody had told her to stop, and the school had no reaction. Harry guessed, correctly, that if it had happened in Japan, someone would take the student aside and explain to her that this sort of thing was just not done. Sato said that was true, but that in addition, anyone who did such a thing would be viewed with some suspicion by those around her, and would get a reputation as someone who tended to rock the boat. There would be a conversation with her parents, and a close eye would be kept on her. For what had to be the fiftieth time that week, Harry shook his head in amazement.

But at the same time, he had seen things that belied the overall picture he had formed. Yasunori had at first seemed reserved and formal, but in getting to know him by spending a lot of time together, Harry had seen humor, annoyance, and the range of emotions that he saw in most people. He was a different person with his friends than with his family. Takenaka was a little outside the Japanese norm, but not so far outside to be a threat or problem. Yosuke had a lot of the characteristics Harry knew well in Fred and George, just kept mostly under wraps; Harry had spent some time entertaining the three Y's (as he had come to think of Yasunori, Yosuke, and Yusuke) with stories of Fred and George's antics. And not only the three Y's, but other first years, were interested in hearing Harry talk about England, Hogwarts, and the Weasleys; even things that were mundane to him were fascinating to them.

There was a spirit, he felt, bubbling under the surface, at least for some people. These people were a lot like British people deep down, but they knew what their society would and wouldn't tolerate, and they kept their visible feelings and actions within the 'correct' limits. But what about Yasunori's parents, who appeared for all the world to

be model Japanese citizens? Had they always been that way, or had their spark of individuality been snuffed out a long time ago? Harry knew he would never know, but he became curious about how Japanese felt, deep down, about the kind of society they lived in. Kaz surely couldn't be the only one who felt strangled by the 'chains of society.'

The book he was halfway through reading shed some light. The American, Stanton, did his best to conform, to follow all the rules, only to constantly find that despite his best efforts he was often breaking some social norm or another. There were dozens, maybe hundreds, of intricate unwritten rules; even some Japanese broke them from time to time, but they were forgiven if they were good citizens in general. Stanton often felt that the attitude of others towards him was, 'he's a foreigner, so he can't understand;' they didn't say it in so many words, of course, but it was what he felt. Reading with interest, Harry couldn't imagine why someone would try so hard to fit into such a culture; it seemed akin to trying to fit into the smallest box one possibly could, then being unable to move at all. He would try to control his impulses, try not to do anything that he knew would be strongly frowned upon, but he would not try to behave like a Japanese. He would not care what anyone thought of him, or that they thought he behaved strangely. I am who I am, he thought. If they don't like it, they can throw me out of the country.

Even so, he also felt that the place was good for him right then. He was tired of Dark wizards and goblins and dementors, tired of people asking and expecting things of him, telling him he owed it to society to do this or that, all the obligations he felt had been thrust upon him. I may get stares here too, but at least they don't want anything from me, except that I don't rock the boat. Right now, I have no problem with that. My boat's been too rocky as it is for the past year. A serene boat sounds just fine.

* * * * *

Harry stood with the three Y's in the large, grassy practice area behind the castle. Eight groups of four surrounded the professor, making a rough circle with the professor at the center. It was overcast,

rain seeming imminent; Harry wondered how much rain would have to fall before they would go inside.

“We will spend this week reviewing group spells before moving on to the main part of the summer’s course,” the professor was saying. “Always remember what you learned so long ago: harmonize your spells. Come from the same place. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Feel your work as a group, come together as a group.” As the professor droned on, Harry wondered if he would ever reach a sentence that didn’t sound like a cliché. His fellow students also seemed bored; they had clearly heard such sentiments many times before.

Ten minutes later, Harry still had not heard anything that he felt would help him do what he was supposed to do. At one point, an entire sentence from the professor went untranslated by Harry’s device. Wonder what that’s all about, he thought. Is it really possible to say absolutely nothing with words?

Rain started falling; lightly at first, becoming steady and strong after a few minutes. Harry looked around for some sign that the class would be moved inside, but the professor continued talking, and the students listened without interest, but appearing unaffected by the rain. What’s with these people, thought Harry. They don’t come in out of the rain? Well, they may not mind getting drenched, but I do. He unobtrusively pointed his wand up, and activated the spell that put up a magical, invisible umbrella. At least it’s invisible, he thought, so it won’t be so noticeable.

A few seconds after it went up, Yusuke glanced at him, then did a double-take, nudging Yasunori and looking at Harry again. Yasunori casually moved behind Harry and whispered, “Stop doing that! We’re not supposed to be doing any spells while the professor is talking!” Harry wondered how they knew, then realized that while the umbrella was invisible, the effect on the water that hit it was very visible, and might even be noticed by the professor if he looked closely enough.

Surprised at Yasunori’s insistent tone—this was more sharply than he had ever spoken to Harry before—Harry was annoyed enough at the prospect that he didn’t immediately do as Yasunori said. Turning his

head and covering his mouth as casually as possible, he whispered, "You mean, you just stand here and get soaked? What are you supposed to do about the rain?"

"You put up with it!" responded Yasunori; Harry heard only the word 'gaman' in Japanese, and realized he'd heard it a lot, but not always with the same translation. Sighing, he deactivated the spell just as he saw someone from the nearest group looking in his direction. If this was England, he thought, the students and the professor would be asking me to teach them the spell. But no, they have to get wet even though there's no good reason to do so...

Similar annoyed thoughts occupied Harry for the next twenty minutes, as the professor continued to say nothing in the least enlightening. Finally, they were free to begin practicing. Four groups faced one direction, spread ten meters apart, as the other four faced the other way. Harry was soaked to the skin, as he assumed everyone else was.

As soon as they were fairly far from the professor, Harry said, "You know, we have this great device in England, called the 'umbrella.' You really ought to look into it."

Yosuke chuckled; Yasunori looked annoyed. "We have umbrellas," said Yosuke guilelessly, which made Yosuke laugh more.

"He was being sarcastic, Yosuke," said Yasunori. To Harry, he asked, "What's the big problem with getting wet?"

Harry looked at him incredulously. "It's uncomfortable. Isn't it for you?"

Yasunori shrugged. "It's not so important."

"But what's the point of not using it, when you can?"

"I don't know. To show that we can endure it, I guess." Again, Harry heard the word 'gaman,' and had to try hard to stop himself from saying that that was the stupidest thing he'd ever heard. "C'mon, let's get going on the spells. Everyone else has already started."

“That’s because they’re not having debates about umbrellas,” said Yosuke.

“They should be,” muttered Harry. “Okay, how do we do this?”

Yosuke frowned. “Didn’t you hear what he said?”

“I heard it, but it gave me no hint about what I should do. Was it really useful for you?”

Yasunori answered. “Not really, but mainly because we’ve heard it so many times. When I was ten years old, it seemed to make more sense. It took a while to learn how to do it.”

“How long did it take?” asked Harry.

“Two or three years.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Oh, good.”

“Why is that good?” asked Yosuke.

“He was being sarcastic again,” said Yasunori.

Yosuke frowned. “You do that a lot. It’s a little confusing. Do they do that a lot in your country?”

“Yes. We get very sarcastic when we’re wet.” The others just looked at him; he sighed. “Yes, it’s very common. Almost everyone does it, and some people do it a lot. I do it less than most people. I guess you don’t do that here?”

“It’s very rare,” said Yosuke. “It’s kind of too strong, people would think it doesn’t show respect for who you’re talking to.”

“Ah. Well, I assume you guys know I don’t mean it like that. So, can anyone give me a little help on this?”

The other three exchanged blank stares. “Well, let’s just start doing it and see how it goes,” suggested Yasunori. Looking at the other groups, Harry saw flashes of light coming at the end of spells; they were supposed to be using a spell that, when successful, created an expanding circle of light that quickly disappeared, like a balloon blowing up quickly and then popping.

Yasunori spoke. “One, two, three!” They all fired, and Harry’s Gift told him that he was going to have a hard time with this. The others’ spells took on the same corkscrew pattern he’d seen from Murata, but more elongated, as if someone had pulled the corkscrew from both ends. The three spells moved together, Harry’s faster spell having already shot past them. They curled around each other, forming what looked like one much tighter corkscrew, then exploded into the ball of light, dying quickly. Harry’s had already done the same thing, a second earlier.

“Well, I think we know what happened there,” said Yosuke.

“I’m a little surprised, actually,” said Yasunori. “Yours is almost as big as ours.” Indeed, Harry had noticed that his light had been perhaps three-fourths as powerful as the others’ combined spell.

“How did you do that?” asked Harry, forgetting for the moment that they’d already said they were unable to explain. Again, they shrugged. This is going to be a long morning, thought Harry.

* * * * *

The rain didn’t let up, but at lunchtime, everyone walked into the cafeteria through a passageway that was both a shelter and a magical dryer; he walked into the cafeteria completely dry, but no less annoyed at having had to endure the rain all morning.

To his further annoyance, it was still raining steadily when lunch was over, and the second half of the lesson would take place outside as well, as it concerned flying. Trudging out to the field, he kept his comments to himself, having already tested the limits of his companions’ tolerance by making several more comments about the rain during lunch. He had then further annoyed the three Y’s by

suggesting that they stay inside until the last minute, even though all of the other students were heading out to the field, meaning that they would be conspicuous by their relative lateness when they did come out. To Harry's 'so what?' attitude, Yasunori pointed out that it had already been explained to Harry that Japanese hated to be in situations where everyone was looking at them, especially when they were purposely doing something different than the others were doing. Heaven forbid we should be late for standing out on the field getting rained on while we wait for the professor, Harry muttered as they walked.

And yet again, the professor talked in a way that expressed to Harry no new information whatsoever, even though he was very interested in flying and in whether the Japanese had an unusual take on it. If they do, he thought, I'm clearly not going to find out about it from this guy. This is supposed to be a special tactical school, and they have a teacher whose lectures are so vague that you don't learn much more than that brooms fly, and this is a good thing. Then again, we do have Binns, so maybe it's a universal thing.

A four-wheeled cart wheeled itself out onto the field, stopping near the professor, who paid no attention to it. Assuming it contained the brooms, Harry was surprised to see that it in fact held a few dozen thick, hollow bamboo poles, about five inches in diameter and five feet long. Wonder what those are for, he thought. Are they going to build something, or is it some kind of strange fighting thing? God only knows, in this country.

Mercifully, the professor finally finished the lecture. "Everyone take a broom; you will have fifteen minutes to practice before we begin." Students walked up to the cart and started taking the poles, one to a person.

Finally, Harry realized what was going on. Dumbfounded, he exclaimed, "Those aren't brooms!"

Many students within range of his voice chuckled. "What are they, then?" joked one.

Yasunori said what was just coming into Harry's head. "Translation problem. Whatever you use to fly doesn't look like that, but the device used your word because it's the equivalent thing. It's the same function, even if you wouldn't recognize it."

"How do you fly on this thing?" Harry asked as the others took their 'brooms.'

"This ought to be interesting," said one student to a friend, in a voice so low that Harry wouldn't have heard it except for his improved hearing.

"You'll get the hang of it," Yasunori assured him. Harry approached the cart; there were only three left. He picked up one and held it vertically in front of him, looking at it, wondering how it worked. He moved it a little closer to his face, and it suddenly rushed toward him as would metal to a magnet, whacking him in the face, the lower part resting against his stomach, parallel to his spine.

Everyone who was looking laughed. Only mildly annoyed at being the subject of such humor, in an accusatory way, Harry asked Yasunori, "Why didn't you tell me it would do that?"

"Sorry," said a grinning Yasunori. "We're all so used to it, I wouldn't have thought of warning you about something like that. Once it gets to within, I'm not sure, maybe 20 or 25 centimeters of your torso, it clicks into place; you have to make a pretty strong effort to push it away. It's attracted to your body."

"To your heartbeat," corrected Yusuke, whose pole was similarly attached to the front of his body, from the top of his chest to a few centimeters from the ground.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot," agreed Yasunori. "Not that it matters, it's not necessary to know that. Anyway, you fly it by leaning one way or the other; it'll go the way you lean. When you're in the air, it'll be between your legs, like this," he went on, demonstrating. "Squeeze it between your legs in a forward direction to go faster, and in a backward direction to slow down."

Harry saw his classmates jump, then fly into the air. "You jump in order to take off?"

Yasunori nodded. "And you land by touching the ground; when you do, it recognizes that you don't want to fly anymore, and it falls away from your body. So, are you ready?"

"What do you do with your hands and arms?"

"There's nothing for them to do; they're free."

Interesting, thought Harry, so intrigued by the device that he'd forgotten about the rain. "Okay, here we go." He had moved the pole down so that it reached his neck from the ground; he was ready.

He jumped, and was suddenly accelerating into the air. It was a very strange feeling, to be flying without needing to use a hand to hold onto a broomstick. At a hundred feet he leveled out, his body now roughly horizontal. "Any reason I can't fly upside down?" he asked Yasunori, who was now flying near him.

In answer, Yasunori turned upside down and flew for a few seconds. "No reason, except that it's a lot harder to see where you're going. You can't fly backwards; it'll always go in the direction your head is pointing." Harry gave it a try for a few seconds, and saw what Yasunori meant. It still felt strange that there was nothing he needed to hold onto; it was hard to shake the feeling that he would just fall off, as he would on a broom.

Yet at the same time, it felt exhilarating. Not only because it had been more than a week since he'd been on a broom, but because his hands were free. This is like flying, he thought, like Voldemort could do. He maneuvered randomly, left and right, up and down. "This is great!" he enthused to the others.

"Even though it's raining?" cracked Yasunori.

Harry knew he was being made fun of, but didn't care. "This is different. This actually can't be avoided, so I don't mind."

Yosuke flew close to him and spoke to the group. "Okay, we're going to do some flying patterns. Just watch what we do, and try to do the same thing. This is group flying, so the important thing is that we all do exactly the same thing."

"Tell me," said an amused Harry, "when is it not important that Japanese all do exactly the same thing?"

Yosuke gave him a 'very funny' look. "It's even more important here than it usually is. Okay?"

Harry grinned. "Got it. Okay, go ahead."

They flew in patterns for fifteen minutes. Yosuke, the leader, would change patterns every few minutes; it usually took Harry only a few seconds to adapt to the new pattern, and he focused on maintaining as exact a formation as possible, even paying attention to his distance from the others.

After they landed, Yosuke looked at him appraisingly. "You're very strange. Either you're really good at something, or really bad at it. There's no middle ground with you."

"Thank you for the compliment," said Harry, with a straight face.

Yosuke spoke. "It wasn't a—oh, I see. Sarcastic."

"A little bit," said Harry. "Part of it was a compliment, but the part that isn't is true, so I don't mind. We can accept criticism more easily when it comes from friends."

"Well, so can we, of course," replied Yosuke, looking pleased that Harry had referred to him that way. "Anyway, you picked that up extremely fast. Oh, he's ready to talk again."

They listened to the professor, who explained that each group would now practice group flying through a set course in formation, then flying a set course in formation while doing group spells. To Harry's surprise, eight red paths suddenly appeared in the air, each one about four meters wide, three meters high, and two hundred meters

long. Each started near where they stood on the field, twisted and turned, and ended near the ground, not too far away.

After the professor finished speaking, Harry's friends added that the magic areas had sensors, and could judge how well a team kept in formation by measuring the distance between each person. After practice, each team would do it one final, official time. To his teammates' surprise, their team finished second in keeping formation. They were not surprised to finish last in the group spells competition, as Harry couldn't join their spells.

"And lastly, the endurance competition," said the professor. "Discuss this with your teammates; if anyone has a medical condition, they should not take part." Harry yet again heard the word 'gaman.'

The four huddled together. "Harry," said Yasunori, "you may not want to do this, but we hope you'll give it a try. In this one, we fly in formation, passing a ball from member to member; if one person holds the ball for more than five seconds, we're finished."

"That sounds easy," said Harry.

"I wasn't finished. The track we fly through has a spell put on it that causes pain to anyone who flies through. And... not a small amount of pain. It increases the longer you fly. Nobody can finish the two hundred meters; the question is how far you can get."

Bewildered, Harry was mute for a few seconds. Finally, he exclaimed incredulously, 'What's the point of that?'

"To endure," said Yusuke earnestly. Again, 'gaman' came out. "To show that we can, and to fly in formation under adverse circumstances."

Again, there was silence as Harry looked back and forth at the other three. He shook his head. "You people are absolutely crazy."

Tolerantly, Yasunori responded, "I understand why you say that, and you're allowed to not go if you don't want to. But this is very important.

What the professor said about medical conditions was just for appearances. Everyone is expected to do it, and it's very prestigious."

"Prestigious?" Harry repeated.

Yasunori nodded. "Yusuke is well-respected around the school, mainly for this. We've done this twice a year since age 10, and the team he's on usually wins. The reason this is important is because it's a team activity; it shows that you'll endure for the sake of your teammates."

Harry sighed. They were making it hard to say no, but the last thing he needed was severe pain; it reminded him a little too much of his time with the goblins. "What happens when you can't take anymore?"

"You fly outside the red zone, and the pain stops," said Yasunori.

"If English parents heard a school was doing this, they'd scream in protest. The teacher would be in big trouble."

"Here," said Yasunori, "parents are proud if their children's team does well."

Harry could see by their faces that it was important to them. "All right. I can't say how far I'll go, but I'll do it."

Yasunori nodded his appreciation. "Thank you, Harry. Unlike the usual cultural-difference cases, here I can definitely understand why this is strange for you. We appreciate your trying. Okay, the formation should be Yusuke on the left, then me, then Yosuke, then Harry. If someone in the middle drops out, whoever's on the right moves over. We still get judged on staying in formation; we lose if we break formation obviously, except if the person is leaving because they can't take it anymore." Harry heard 'gaman dekinai,' or 'can't gaman,' for 'can't take it anymore.' He'd heard the word so often he was beginning to think of this as the 'gaman contest.'

"What kind of pain is it?" asked Harry.

"It's different every time," said Yosuke. "So you can't mentally prepare for it."

Naturally, thought Harry. Boy, these people are strange. Well, at least I can get out any time I want to. He turned to look where the others were looking; one team had already started. In the distance, he saw one flier leave the red zone, soon followed by another, then another. Five seconds later, the zone disappeared, and the last flier returned and landed. All four were breathing heavily; it was easy to tell from their faces that they'd been in severe pain.

"Sixty-two meters," said the professor casually. "Next team."

"Yusuke will set the pace," said Yasunori to Harry. "You're disqualified if you go faster than fifteen kilometers per hour."

"How far do teams usually get?" asked Harry.

"What we just saw was about average. A hundred meters is really good. I don't know what the record is, but sixty years ago, one team did a hundred and fifty, which is amazing."

"That means, all four stayed in that long?"

"No," said Yasunori. "Only two have to stay in for it to count. Remember, it ends when one person holds the ball for longer than five seconds; that happens when all three others have dropped out." They watched as the second team finished at fifty-seven meters.

Three more teams went; one team got ninety-three meters, which most agreed would be hard to beat. "Yusuke's done over a hundred before, though," said Yasunori with pride.

"So then our team should win," said Harry.

Yasunori shook his head. "To get that far, it's necessary for two people to do it. If all three of us drop out by fifty-five, we'll end up with sixty, even if Yusuke could have gone further." I should have thought of that, thought Harry.

They were the next-to-last team. Harry stood on the right, Yusuke counted down, and they jumped as one and ascended. After five seconds, they reached the beginning of the zone.

The pain was headache-type pain, starting as a strong headache, and quickly turning into what Harry assumed was migraine-type pain, even though he'd never had one before. He passed the ball back to Yosuke, then gripped his head. Looking to his left, he saw intense concentration on the faces of the others. Looking at them, he had two simultaneous, conflicting thoughts. One was that this was the stupidest thing he'd ever heard of, and the other was that it made a certain kind of sense, in a bizarre way. How much pain will you put up with for the sake of others? He thought of Neville's parents, and knew that such a fate was the risk every Auror took, and they took that risk for all of society. Still, he'd been through more than enough for a lifetime.

The third time he got the ball, the pain was becoming unbearable, and he passed it back, planning to get out. But to his great surprise, as he focused intensely on bearing it, the pain started to ease off. Well, that's strange, he thought; they said it only got worse. It looks like it's getting worse for them, so why not for me?

As Yosuke dropped out and Harry moved over to take his place, it suddenly dawned on him, a burst of intuition he knew he couldn't confirm, but was sure was correct. Auror Leader. One of the modifications, like the seeing spells and good hearing, was that with enough focus and concentration, one could reduce the pain, maybe even eliminate it. It made perfect sense; the Auror Leader no doubt had access to all kinds of valuable information, and no one can hold up under torture for long. You could probably even tolerate the Cruciatus Curse with this.

Harry got the ball from Yasunori, who continued for a few seconds, but just as Harry was starting to pass the ball back from him, he broke formation and headed out of the zone. Now in significant but tolerable pain, Harry quickly moved over and passed it to Yusuke, hoping to do so before the five-second limit. Yusuke was taking deep breaths, focusing intently, and Harry could see why he got so much

respect. If not for this peculiar new ability, Harry knew he would be gone as well.

They passed it back and forth, Harry taking care to at least appear to be in serious pain, clutching his head once every few seconds between turns holding the ball. They had reached the halfway point and were heading back. Yusuke, looking like he would scream, finally bowed out after a last pass to Harry. Harry flew for five more seconds, and the red zone disappeared from around him. When he landed, he saw Yusuke sitting on the ground, holding his head, being congratulated by the others; Harry sat next to him. Yusuke looked at him, saying nothing, but the respect was very clear in his eyes.

Harry suddenly felt a burst of conflicting emotions, as if two sides of himself were arguing.

You don't deserve any congratulations, any credit. You were only able to do that because of what that device did to you.

I'm getting credit now for what I did before. That device gave me these things because of what I did in there.

Because you killed your parents.

I didn't kill them. They would have wanted me to do that.

But it still feels that way.

Yes, it does.

You can never be Auror Leader. Their blood is on your hands. These abilities came at the cost of their lives.

And what about the lives I saved, in that other reality?

They were your parents. You can't rationalize it.

I can try.

He looked back at Yusuke gravely and nodded.

* * * * *

“One hundred and twenty-seven meters?” repeated Sato. He had arrived home only fifteen minutes before, and the family had just started dinner. “That’s extremely impressive.”

“It was all anybody could talk about for the next half hour, until school let out,” agreed Yasunori.

“You must be very proud, Harry-san,” said Sawako kindly.

“Um, not really,” said Harry, who then realized that he was supposed to just agree, even if it wasn’t true. Too late, he thought as he took in the surprised expressions of everyone but Yasunori. “Sorry, but it isn’t a tradition for me, or something that’s important. I did it because I didn’t want to let them down, but I don’t care one way or the other.”

“That’s the thing to be proud of,” replied Yasunori’s mother. “That you would do that for them, and they would do it for you.”

Harry shrugged. “Yeah, I understand, but the problem is, I’ve been through this kind of thing in real life, and it’s extremely grim. The last thing I want is anyone suffering for me. It’s happened before, and I hate it.”

Sawako said nothing, focusing on eating her food; Harry wondered if she dropped the topic because it was veering close to potentially sensitive areas. “Of course, no one wants anyone else to suffer for them,” agreed Sato. “It’s more that you would for each other. It fosters the feeling of group cohesion.”

Harry knew that he shouldn’t say more, because he disagreed with them, but couldn’t resist adding, “Well, my idea is that there shouldn’t be any suffering at all, or at least, no unnecessary suffering.”

Sato nodded. “Again, that is understandable, given your experiences. Fortunately, this test is the only way we can test ourselves against such adverse conditions. If everyone had been through what you

have, the test would not be necessary.” Harry almost responded, ‘it’s not necessary,’ but stopped himself.

“And what made it really strange,” said Yasunori, “was that we didn’t think he’d make it half as far as he did. We were outside all day, and it rained all day, and he wouldn’t stop complaining about standing in the rain—“

“Yasunori!” his mother admonished him. “You shouldn’t speak about Harry-san so disrespectfully!”

“I’m sorry, Mother,” said Yasunori immediately.

“No, he’s right,” interjected Harry. “What he said is absolutely true. I kept going on about it. I think I was starting to really annoy them.”

“Well, Harry-san,” said Sato, “your feeling is, again, very natural for a Westerner, but for us, that he may be right is not the point. When in the presence of elders, he should speak more respectfully, even if he is on familiar terms with you.”

Should have known, thought Harry. “Ah, I see. Well, anyway, I assume... by the way, I heard the word ‘gaman’ a lot today, and a few times it had different translations. I got ‘bear,’ ‘put up with,’ ‘endure,’ and ‘tolerate.’ What’s the deal with that?”

“I’m not surprised,” agreed Sato. “‘Gaman’ is more or less a Japanese concept, one that you do not have. It is the notion that you can tolerate an unpleasant or even painful situation, usually for the sake of relationships, or social stability. For example, an adult whose parents were verbally abusive might wish to avoid his parents, but would instead tolerate the situation for the sake of filial piety. In addition to sympathizing, we admire and respect such a person. I assume that last use of ‘gaman’ was translated as ‘tolerate?’” he asked, giving the last word in English.

“Yes, that’s right.”

"Whereas, in your society, I believe that man would not only not be respected, he would in fact be criticized. Is that correct?" His wife and mother's faces showed their shock.

"Basically, yes." To Sawako and Maeko, he added, "Not that we don't respect our parents, but we would say that situation isn't healthy. It's bad for him, and his friends would say he needs to get away from them, at least for a while."

Sato nodded. "And your attitude today is an example. Your achievement is greatly respected at the school, but you do not value it; you would just as soon not have done it. We use the word 'gaman' approvingly, mostly in situations which I believe you would not approve of tolerating. Because of this difference in attitudes, the word does not translate well. For us, it is a virtue; for you, at best, an unfortunate necessity."

"So," said Yasunori, "because he was so unhappy about being out in the rain, we assumed it was because he didn't have strong ability to gaman. So we were shocked when he did so well on the course." Turning to Harry, he added, "I should have known, because of what I know about your history. It was just so strange to me, to us, that you were so bothered by the rain."

"I wasn't bothered by the rain," Harry clarified. "I was bothered by the fact that we were standing in the rain for hours when we could easily have been using umbrellas. Or, better yet, gone inside. It didn't bother me when we were flying, because then, we actually couldn't do anything about it. That's the difference."

"I understand that now, of course," said Yasunori. "But you can see why it made us think what we did."

"Yes, I can," agreed Harry. "Like with a lot of the things we've talked about, it's a question of your culture. You would say, 'what a guy, he stands in the rain for hours, doesn't let it bother him.' But we would say, 'what are you doing, you idiot? Get in out of the rain!'"

"In my dealings with Westerners," said Sato thoughtfully, "I have had so many misunderstandings regarding this that I have come to

consider that every time I translate the idea of 'gaman,' I am cautious to culturally translate as well, if necessary. They tend not to think we or they should gaman, but that we or they should take steps to change the situation so that gaman is not necessary. Much like Harry-san preferring to use an umbrella."

"But why don't they use umbrellas, at the school?" asked Harry. "Yasunori-san couldn't answer, but there has to be another reason than gaman. Isn't there?"

Sato thought for a few seconds. "I believe it is a custom, behavior that became a custom because of the Japanese tendency to do things the same way. I don't know, but I would speculate that a long time ago, some professor decided that it was a good idea for students to stand in the rain to toughen them up, and to see who would complain. Perhaps a few other professors thought it was a good idea, and everyone started doing it. Now, I suspect that there may be some professors who would prefer to allow the use of umbrellas, but do not do so because this is the way things are done, and changing would be conspicuous."

"In England, everyone would complain," said Harry.

"No doubt," agreed Sato. "By the way, at the office today, I had a talk with the Foreign Minister of your country's government. He wishes to meet with you, and will come to Japan to do so. Would a weekday evening, or a Saturday, be more convenient for you?"

Harry sighed. It had occurred to him that this might happen, but he had hoped it wouldn't. "No."

Confused, Sato said, "I'm sorry, I meant to ask that as an either-or question, not a yes-no question. I meant—"

"I know what you meant," said Harry, realizing he was being rude by interrupting, but not caring. "I mean, I don't want to meet with him."

All Satos looked at him with surprise, then looked away or at their food, trying not to stare. Hesitantly, Sato said, "Harry-san, I am sure

that he is simply being solicitous. He told me that he wanted to see if there was anything you needed, or anything he could do for you.”

Harry tried to control his anger. “I don’t care why he wants to talk to me. I won’t meet with him.”

Sato appeared truly baffled. “May I ask why?”

“He works for Kingsley.”

There was a brief silence. “I do not wish to pry, but I would like to understand why that is a problem.”

Again, Harry sighed deeply. “A lot of things happened to me a month ago, not only Voldemort’s defeat, but things after that. The last one, the one that made me want to get away from England, is something I couldn’t talk about even if I wanted to. Let’s just say that it was really awful, and he directly caused it. I don’t want to talk to him, or anyone who works for him.”

“Was it his intention to harm you, or—“

“I don’t care what his intention was!” Harry interrupted, raising his voice. There was a shocked silence. Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to calm down. “Sorry. I don’t mean to be rude. But it doesn’t matter what his intention was, it’s no excuse for what he did. What he did, I wouldn’t do to my worst enemy, and if British people knew what he did, he’d be out as Minister in a day. I could bring him down if I wanted to. I haven’t done that. But I’m having nothing to do with him, even if he says it’s to help me. I don’t trust him.”

“I... understand.” Harry sensed that Sato didn’t really understand, but was trying to extricate himself from the topic. “What should I tell the Foreign Minister when I talk to him tomorrow? Does he know the situation between you and the Minister?”

Harry thought about it. “No, I’d bet he doesn’t. I’m sure Kingsley told as few people as possible. If it got out, he’d be in serious trouble.” He paused again, thinking. “No, the more I think about it, he probably didn’t ask the Foreign Minister to do this; the Foreign Minister must

have done it on his own. Kingsley wouldn't want to attract attention to the situation. So, he probably doesn't even know. To be honest, I don't care what you tell him. But... tell him that I appreciate his concern, but I don't want to have any contact with the government right now. If he asks why, tell him to ask Kingsley."

Sato nodded. "I will do so. And I am sorry to have caused you any distress by relaying the message."

Harry shrugged. "You couldn't know." At least, thought Harry, he won't be doing that again.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 17, Ronin: Harry finds it hard to stay quiet in the face of injustice when he discovers that Kaz has been made an outcast from society for what Harry feels is a greatly insufficient reason.

From Chapter 17: "Yes! He understands! Only someone who comes from other lands, who knows what is the natural state of ghosts, who has not been brainwashed by our society, can understand the truth! Oh, young man, what sprang naturally from your lips I have labored for so long to tell others, to little or no avail. We are shackled, chained here by that hideous spell. I tell you, the Antiquity Links are the true 'chains of society!'"

Chapter 17

Ronin

The next two days were mildly frustrating for Harry, as the lessons focused mostly on group spells, which he still couldn't come close to coordinating with the others. The professor introduced new spells slowly, only one per day; Harry could do them adequately by himself, but that was all, and it was impossible to disguise the fact that he wasn't contributing to the group spells. The professor seemed to have no interest in the fact that Harry was having a hard time; Yosuke speculated that the professor's attitude was that every student in the class should be able to do group spells, so if Harry couldn't, it wasn't something that he should be concerned with.

He did extra practice with the others on Tuesday, and would have done so on Wednesday, but he had his appointment with Takenaka, which he looked forward to. It was more interesting to practice tactics and strategy, and learn new spells he could do, than futilely try to do group spells.

He headed off to meet Takenaka at the same place they had last week, this time by himself; he didn't want Yasunori around, in case something happened. Not that it would, he reminded himself; he imagined that Murata had learned his lesson last week. Hope so, anyway.

He walked up the path and through some trees to the open area where he'd practiced last week, but when he got there, no one was there. Strange that he's not here yet, thought Harry. He seems like the punctual type—

He saw a low-level spell twenty meters ahead, and walked forward briskly, wand out; it was at the edge of the open space, near a tree. When he had reached the center of the open area, four wizards, one of them Murata, suddenly stepped out from behind trees in front of what he'd seen. He now knew what the spell was; Takenaka, on the ground, in a Freezing spell. Looking around, he now saw that there were three groups of four: one ahead, one to his left, and one to his right. All were about ten meters away. Here we go, he thought.

All three groups were readying their group spells; Harry decided not to do the Patronus again, since they'd be expecting it. Without moving his wand to show that he was doing a spell, he shot a Full-Body Bind ahead, hitting one of Murata's group. To his right, he put up the wall-type shield he'd used against Voldemort. Just as the group on the left's spell was coming together, Harry Disapparated, appearing right behind them. As they whirled around to face him, he was able to get off two more Full-Body Binds, the second as he darted away in anticipation of the spells that would be coming. The three remaining members of Murata's group advanced on Harry's current location; the third group stayed where it was.

The shield had proved effective at disrupting the second group's spell, so Harry knew how he would win. He ran back to the center in a circular pattern, getting off one more Full-Body Bind as he ran. It was almost bound not to miss, as it was sent into a group of five people. Again, he tried to cast it inconspicuously.

In the center of the open area again, he saw the intact group start to set up another group spell. What's wrong with them, thought Harry, didn't they notice that it didn't work last time? Maybe it's that Japanese thing about 'this is the way things are done.' He put up the shield again, turning to look at the other four. They were setting up a group spell, but this was a group that had two members from each; Harry wondered if their spells would harmonize properly. Deciding to find out, he held his defensive spell as their four spells came together. As he thought might be the case, they didn't mesh, and the four spells veered off in different directions. Harry sent off yet another Bind, making a purposeful decision to save Murata for last.

Just as Harry was wondering why they didn't try individual spells rather than group ones, Murata and the two with him started doing just that. Harry darted forward, staying equidistant from both groups, trying to get to where he could see both at the same time. The group of four wound up for yet another try at a group spell. Wow, thought Harry, they don't learn, do they. Deciding to do something different, he waited until the spells had just been cast, then dashed directly at Murata's group. The group spell formed its circle, but Harry just escaped its field of effect, shooting a Bind at the student next to

Murata as he ran, watching their spells to make sure he didn't run into one.

He then Apparated to just two meters behind the intact group, shooting off Binds as they turned to face him. He dodged spells from two of them as two went down; Murata and the other one from the other group ran forward, and Harry had to dodge their spells as well. By running, blocking, and dodging spells, Harry soon took care of the others, leaving only Murata. Harry felt a powerful urge to use Levicorpus again. He almost did, but resisted the temptation. Going to do this by the book, he thought. But boy, would it be satisfying. He blocked a spell from Murata, then sent a sinker. Murata fell forward, his block missing, and Harry cast the Bind on him while he was on the ground.

Harry looked for the magic he'd seen before the fight, and found Takenaka, still Frozen, lying on his side. Casting the counter-curse, Harry helped him up. "Sorry about that. I didn't think they'd go after you."

Takenaka nodded. "I was just incidental, of course; they would not have bothered with me had I not already been here. They must have followed me here. As for the apology, it is not necessary. The fact that I was able to watch what happened made it quite worth it." Takenaka gave Harry a wicked smile, showing the satisfaction he felt.

"Glad you enjoyed it," said Harry, also grinning. "But what's with them? They can see I can block the group spell, so they just keep on doing it? Why?"

"This is a result of being raised in what, compared to yours, is a regimented society. This is why I wanted to practice with you, besides the..." Harry nodded, understanding that Takenaka was referring to the Gift, but didn't want to be overheard. "You think on your feet, adapt your tactics to the situation. Aurors value these traits, but schools do not. They just think that they have to keep at it if it does not work the first time."

"Wow," said Harry. "Amazing. Hey, didn't they break social protocol by attacking you, since you're their senior?"

“Yes, they did. I will be discussing retribution with my classmates.” Takenaka leaned over and whispered, “I said that for their benefit. In fact, my classmates may not wish to take revenge on so many, especially as the attack on me was incidental to the one on you. I don’t care that much, but I would prefer that they worried about the prospect.”

“I can understand that,” Harry whispered back. “I was tempted to use your spinning spell, but I didn’t think you’d want people knowing you taught it to me.”

“I appreciate that,” agreed Takenaka, still whispering. “I have had a few requests, which I’ve fended off.”

“Well, I guess I’d better get their wands,” said Harry, now speaking normally. He walked over from person to person, resisting the temptation to say something to Murata, who he guessed would be in enough trouble as it was. Wands in hand, Harry and Takenaka walked off towards the castle.

* * * * *

Three hours later, Sato was waiting in the Minister’s outer office, politely listening to the receptionist, who was pretty, pleasant, and never seemed to stop talking. Suddenly a tall man with red hair and ungainly scars on his face walked out. Sato thought that he would pass him by and head out of the office, but the man glanced at him. Sato thought that the man thought he knew who he was, but wasn’t sure. The man extended a hand. “Hi, I’m Bill Weasley.”

“Ah, yes, the bank. I’m Kenichi Sato. It’s good to meet you.”

“You too. You’re here about Harry, right?”

“Yes, I am.” Sato decided it would be imprudent to deny what was obvious, but he would offer little information.

“How’s he doing?”

“Fine. He is slowly adjusting to our society. There are many surprises and differences, but it is stimulating for him. It is probably better, as it may help him keep his mind off things.”

Bill’s face took on a darker expression. “Well, there’s a lot for him to keep his mind off. Listen... do you know what happened to him?” Sato could tell from Bill’s tone that Bill knew, and wanted to know if Sato also knew.

“I... do not have all the facts,” said Sato cautiously. “He does not talk about it.”

Bill nodded. “As well he wouldn’t. But you know it’s bad. We appreciate your looking after him. We heard a little from Fred’s visit, of course.”

“Ah, yes, he is your brother? The honored ancestor?”

Bill quickly smothered the chuckle that escaped. “Yes, he is. He said the Japanese ghosts were a bunch of fuddy-duddies.”

Sato frowned. “I do not know that particular idiom.”

“It means they’re conservative, and don’t have a sense of humor.”

“I see. Well, that is true, but the honored spirits usually do not.”

“Yeah, that’s true. Fred’s kind of an exception.”

“In any case, Harry enjoyed his visit; it seemed to pick up his spirits.”

Bill grinned. “Well, I would tell Fred you said that, but his ego’s already too big as it is. Look, I don’t want to hold you up, but I wanted to say hi. Give Harry my regards, and tell him the bank is so busy I still have no free time.”

“Nice to have met you,” said Sato, not intending to do as Bill had asked; it was clear to him that Harry needed to be reminded of home as little as possible.

“You too,” said Bill, and left the office. Darlene showed Sato into the Minister’s office. Sato’s first impression on meeting Kingsley was that he was taller than Sato had thought, and that his clothing style was slightly unconventional for a Minister. They exchanged introductions, and sat.

“So, how is Harry doing?”

“Generally well, except when certain topics come up. Most of the time, he is pleasant and even-tempered. But he sometimes reacts emotionally, especially when matters related to his past or his homeland come up. This happened two days ago, when Foreign Minister Shelton requested a meeting with him.”

Wearing a poker face, Kingsley nodded. “Well, as you know, he’s been through a lot.”

He’s not giving anything away, thought Sato. Not that I expected him to. “Indeed. The fact is, however, that in refusing the meeting, he expressed a, forgive me, strong antipathy towards you. It would help me greatly in dealing with him if I were to know the source of this feeling, and I assure you that I would repeat nothing you told me, to anyone. I would testify to this under Veritaserum.”

Kingsley’s eyebrows twitched; he seemed to suppress his reaction. “I understand. He didn’t tell you?”

“No, he did not.”

“Well, Mr. Sato, unfortunately, there’s a reason for that. I appreciate your offer, about Veritaserum, and I have no doubt that you are sincere. But certain things are too sensitive to be divulged, even under such conditions. I’m sure you understand.”

“I do,” said Sato. “But I would not ask this if it were not important. Minister... he has said nothing about this, but we know that he is Auror Leader.”

Sato had decided in advance to surprise Kingsley with this, to say it at a point in the conversation when Kingsley would not be expecting

such a revelation. Kingsley had a good poker face, thought Sato, but his eyes betrayed him. The eyes speak when the mouth is silent, went the old saying.

“What makes you say that?” asked Kingsley, as casually as he could.

“When Harry was apprehended, the Auror scanned his forehead for the invisible marking, a temporary one of course, that the Japanese government gives foreigners with permission to be in the country. He of course did not have it, but he had another invisible mark, which we did not mention to him. I have researched this mark, and found it to be the mark of the Auror Leader. When a new Auror Leader is announced, there is a ceremony in which this mark is revealed; this serves as confirmation of his status.

“Now, before I continue... when I talked to Mr. Shelton yesterday, his behavior was most peculiar; he seemed to remember the events of the day before differently. I checked with a simple question, and he could not answer a question he absolutely should have been able to answer. This fact, combined with the knowledge that Harry’s feelings toward you could cause you great political peril if they became known, have prompted me to take certain precautions.” He saw Kingsley’s eyes take on a harder edge.

“I have written down extensive details of what I know, what I suspect, and the reason I came here today. Please forgive my rudeness for saying this, but if I leave this office with a less than perfect memory, things will be made widely known in England that you do not wish to be widely known. As things stand now, I have no intention to repeat anything, and my Veritaserum offer still stands.”

“I appreciate that,” said Kingsley dryly. “May I ask what your point is?”

“Based partly on research and partly on a few unguarded comments he made to the ghost of Mr. Fred Weasley, I have been able to piece together much of what happened after he was rescued from the goblins. Not the details, only the broad strokes. He took a test to become Auror Leader, not of his own volition, but of yours. The test, I believe, requires one to sacrifice one’s family in order to save society. Not in reality; perhaps in a dream, or some such unreal state. He

passed, is now grief-stricken, and blames you. Is this a fair summary of the current situation?”

Kingsley stared at him. “Before I answer, I would like to know the reason you are telling me this.”

“There is something I must know. I could ask him, but I strongly prefer not to. However, I will if I have to. My question is: does he know that he is Auror Leader?”

Kingsley was silent, clearly weighing his answer. Sato fought to keep his expression level and his nerves under control; rarely was he ever involved in such a serious confrontation, and this man was not a politician, but an Auror, someone no doubt used to getting his way.

Kingsley finally answered. “Yes. He knows.”

Sato nodded. He dearly wanted to ask what had prompted Kingsley to take such a drastic step, but he didn’t, because it wasn’t crucial for him to know. “Do you want me to, if the opportunity occurs, nudge him in the direction of returning home?”

Kingsley’s answer was emphatic. “No. When he comes back, it’s going to have to be because he decided to, not because he felt pressured to. You should know that since he defeated Voldemort, he responds very badly to pressure. Tell him he has to do something, and you increase the likelihood that he won’t want to do it. But he’ll be no good to us if his heart isn’t in it. Just follow his lead. If he wants a quiet life, do your best to see that he gets it.”

“Not totally quiet, anyway,” said Sato. “He made an enemy at the school, an older student whose first words to him were an insult. He retaliated, and a few hours ago, he was ambushed by a dozen older students.”

Kingsley chuckled. “I bet he kicked their asses.”

Sato nodded. “Because he holds the Elder Wand?”

“Not only that. He’s a fighter; he doesn’t back down.”

“So I have observed. Minister... no offense is intended, but I hear that the current political gossip has it that you may not last the year in this position.”

“Not to be repeated, but I give it two, two and a half months,” responded Kingsley casually.

Either he doesn't care, thought Sato, or he hides it well. I suppose he is an Auror, not a politician. “It occurs to me that Harry could be a political asset of great value to an unscrupulous politician, and that whoever replaces you is likely to immediately request his return from my government, which is likely to feel obliged to do so.”

Again, Kingsley chuckled. “I pity the politician who thinks he can use Harry as an asset. Harry hates politics, and he's no fool; he'll keep his distance. But yes, your thought has occurred to me as well. He would never believe this, but I do care about him.” Sato saw regret in Kingsley's eyes. Either he's telling the truth, thought Sato, or he's a great actor. “I did what I did under great pressure, the nature of which I can't reveal to anyone. But it failed, and I realize now that he needed time to get over the Voldemort experience, almost his whole life, really. I should have known how passing the test would affect him, and that he simply couldn't do what I was asking of him. Our society's need is great, but he's been through too much, and you can't do what you can't do.

“I will ask one thing of you, Mr. Sato. If I lose my position, let him know immediately, before my successor has the chance to request his return. Suggest he go to North America or Australia.”

Sato understood the reason: since those wizarding governments allowed long-term visits without official permission or paperwork, England would be unable to demand his return. He was satisfied that Kingsley did in fact care about Harry, or he wouldn't have made the suggestion. “If the time comes, I will do so.”

Kingsley nodded. “You offered to encourage him to come back. Why?”

“That was before you said what you just did, though I was only referring to subtle encouragement. I said it because the values of my country would suggest such a thing. We feel that one should put society’s interests ahead of one’s own, no matter how heavy the burden.”

Kingsley shook his head. “I understand that, but everyone has a breaking point, and what I did pushed him over, hopefully only temporarily. If we try to make him come back, it’ll be permanent. Thank you, but no. Just do what’s best for him, and things will take care of themselves.” After a short pause, he added, “I assume you arranged this appointment through Arthur because you wanted to come in under the radar?”

Sato blinked. “I’m sorry, but I’m not familiar with that phrase.”

Kingsley grunted. “Sorry. I was under cover with Muggles for a while, and picked up some idioms. I mean, you wanted to avoid notice, especially from your government.”

“That’s right. My government would not understand the personal aspect of this; they would want to know details, which out of consideration for Harry I am reluctant to provide.”

“That’s good,” said Kingsley. “I’m sure Harry would approve, if he knew. Well, if you need to see me again, just do the same thing, go through Arthur.”

“Thank you, Minister,” said Sato, and left. Thank goodness it didn’t go as badly as I’d feared it might. Struck by a sudden impulse though he knew it was irrational, he decided that when he got back to Japan, the first thing he would do was check his notes. Just in case.

* * * * *

Harry was sitting in a wooden chair in the backyard, looking around at the immaculately kept yard. With both Sato’s wife and mother here, thought Harry, you couldn’t say the house wasn’t being cared for. It always looks as if it was clean enough to eat off the floor. They’d probably find that phrase disgusting, though.

Yasunori walked into the backyard. "Ah, Harry, there you are. I didn't know you were home, I thought you might still be with the headmaster."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "You know what happened?"

"Of course. Since last week, we've been keeping an eye on Murata, without his knowledge, of course. We didn't know if he would try this again, but we weren't shocked. We followed Murata and his group from a distance, and Yosuke did a remote visual recording spell."

"Yosuke's pretty into the surveillance stuff, isn't he?"

Yasunori nodded. "I said that to him once. He said, 'everyone needs a hobby.' Anyway, we watched the whole thing, and then spent most of the next half hour laughing about it. Then we showed it to most of the other first years, the ones who were still at the school. It was a really big hit."

"Glad you enjoyed it. But aren't you going to get in trouble with the second years? They're going to be furious that you saw that."

"They won't know."

"That many people can keep a secret?"

"It's very rare to have a cross-grade friendship, and there aren't any here," said Yasunori. "We don't talk with the older students, certainly not as friends. Anyway, so what happened with the headmaster?"

"Well, Takenaka came with me. When I gave the headmaster all those wands, he said, 'I'm not sure I want to hear this story.'"

Yasunori laughed. "I didn't know he had that kind of sense of humor. I don't think he'd make a joke like that with one of the Japanese students."

"So, I told him the story; he didn't make me hold the white thing this time. He said we should go ahead and practice, asked where we'd be,

and told me he'd send for me after Murata and the others came back for their wands.

"An hour and a half later, he did. I went to his office, and there's Murata, who looked furious, but never made eye contact with me the whole time."

"He's probably embarrassed," suggested Yasunori. "I can only imagine what the headmaster said to him. Probably that his parents would be called, maybe even his patriarch. We hope, anyway."

"The headmaster gave us both a talk; it was mainly directed at Murata, but he acted like it was both of us. He said this had to end, and anyone who continued it would be expelled. He said that tomorrow, five minutes before the first class, we have to meet in front of the castle and apologize to each other, publicly. Murata has to do it first, since he insulted me first. I have to do it more humbly, since I humiliated him worse than he humiliated me. Then that's that, he said, and we move on, it's done."

Yasunori nodded. "Murata should have agreed to this a long time ago, of course. I think Okada-san did it this way to help Murata save face; your apologizing more humbly gives him a way out with some dignity."

"What about my dignity?" Harry joked.

Yasunori chuckled. "You just defeated twelve older students. The last thing you need is more dignity."

Yasunori's father slid the glass door and stepped into the backyard. "Konbonwa," Yasunori and Harry said in unison.

"Konbonwa," he greeted them. "Harry-san, your accent is getting better."

Harry shrugged. "Yasunori's been bothering me about it. He says I've been here long enough that I shouldn't rely on my translating device all the time."

“Just standard phrases,” protested Yasunori. “Good evening, good morning, thank you, hello, I’m sorry...”

Grinning, Harry continued the sentence. “I’m very sorry, I’m very very sorry, words can’t begin to express how sorry I am...”

Yasunori frowned. “Very funny.” Sato suppressed a smile.

“Hey, I have to practice for tomorrow. The headmaster said I had to do it in Japanese; he doesn’t want to take any chances on the wording being a little off. He made sure I’d memorized the phrase before he let me go.”

“What are you saying, both of you?” asked Yasunori.

“Apparently, he’s supposed to apologize for insulting my dignity, or something like that, and use the phrase ‘moshiwake gozaimasen,’ and bow 20 degrees. I have to apologize for dueling in an insensitive and unsportsmanlike manner, say ‘taihen moshiwake gozaimasen,’ and bow 30 degrees.” Harry’s translator had given the phrases as ‘I apologize’ and ‘I deeply apologize.’ “So, is this really how disputes are resolved in Japan? By bowing lower than the other guy?”

“If necessary, yes,” said Sato. “It is not uncommon for a third party in a position of authority to impose a settlement, and dictate the terms. Sometimes the terms are equal, sometimes unequal, as is the case here. Keep in mind, Harry-san, that the headmaster has paid you a compliment here, one that you might not recognize. By imposing the more humble apology on you, he has in a sense said that Murata must be placated, for the sake of social harmony. Observers will know that you are the more reasonable one, having agreed to the apology. In a sense, the headmaster has said without words that you are the ‘bigger man,’ as you would say, deserving of more respect.

“Now, in adult society, Murata would recognize this, and be shamed by it. He would have an opportunity to reclaim more respect, however: knowing the terms, he could voluntarily apologize in the same way as you must. Bow at the same angle, use similar words. Then, people would see his willingness to repair the problem, and he would be seen with respect equal to yours.”

Harry shook his head in wonder. "All this is giving me a headache."

"Would you like some aspirin?" offered Yasunori.

Harry grinned, as did Sato, who said, "Harry-san is using a phrase which in English is not to be taken literally. It just means that he cannot easily wrap his mind around what I was saying. But you do understand, do you not, Harry-san?"

"Yes, I do. But it's really strange."

"What would happen in England, in this situation?" asked Yasunori. "How would it be resolved?"

Shrugging, Harry responded, "It probably wouldn't be resolved. They might go back and forth, who knows how long it would take. As long as the students didn't break any school rules, teachers wouldn't get involved. They wouldn't see it as their job to resolve social disputes between the students." He went on to tell them the story of his first meeting with Draco Malfoy, and the lasting effects of his rejection of Malfoy's offer. "We would have been enemies anyway, though. I wasn't going to put up with his attitude, and he wasn't going to put up with my not putting up with his attitude. It was unavoidable."

"Interesting," said Yasunori. "The same kind of thing could happen here, though. The difference here was that Murata was causing a huge social disruption, so the headmaster thought he couldn't ignore it."

"In addition," added his father, "no doubt part of the headmaster's action was prompted by Harry-san's foreignness, and his high diplomatic standing. If Harry-san were Japanese, the headmaster might have taken no action. Murata would have tried again with a larger number, and if no number was sufficient to defeat Harry-san, then they would have attempted to take vengeance on Harry-san's classmates, hoping to make him unpopular. If this succeeded, they would accomplish their objective by socially isolating him. If he was popular, his classmates would band together to resist the pressure,

and a state of open warfare could occur. This is another substantial part of what the headmaster was trying to prevent.”

“I hadn’t thought that far ahead,” mused Yasunori. “Harry is pretty popular among the first years now, so it might not work. But I guess part of the point of this is that you shouldn’t be able to upset the social structure just by being more powerful than everyone else.”

“Yes, exactly,” said Sato. “Within one’s own age group, yes.” Turning to Harry, he added, “But in our society, seniority trumps everything, including greater power. Were you Japanese, you would be expected to bow before your seniors, no matter how much your magical power exceeded theirs.” Glad I’m not Japanese, then, thought Harry.

“Oh, and Harry-san, something from the office. I have confirmed that Foreign Minister Shelton’s wish to meet with you was purely of his own initiative. He now understands that he need not, and should not, concern himself with you.”

Wonder what happened there, thought Harry; he quickly decided that he didn’t care, and was happy to be left alone. “Thanks,” he said to Sato.

“Not at all,” responded Sato. “We should go in, dinner is almost ready.”

* * * * *

The apologies went off as planned the next day. School gossip was that the matter was over; Harry certainly hoped so. Yosuke joked that Harry should be made to apologize to the twelve second years he defeated, for making them look so bad.

The next week went by quietly, with nothing out of the ordinary happening. Near the end of Harry’s third week with the Satos, he commented that he wanted to spend some time that weekend poking around the Japanese Muggle world. Having already established that there was nothing stopping Japanese wizards from visiting the Muggle world anytime they wanted, Harry was also interested in testing the limits of his freedom there. Would he be allowed to do so?

He couldn't see any reason why not, but then, this country was pretty strange.

Sato's response was to agree, but to suggest that Yasunori accompany Harry, largely to give Harry advice if he needed any guidance on dealing with anything that might come up, since though it was Muggle, it was still Japanese. Harry agreed, but he knew there was one thing he wanted to do that Yasunori wouldn't be able to do with him.

The way from the 'downtown' shopping area to the Muggle world turned out to be not unlike how one reached Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. Harry walked through a door into what seemed like a dark room, and the next thing he knew, he was standing in an apparently little-used alleyway in Tokyo Station, which according to Yasunori was the most-used station in the Tokyo area. It certainly looked like it, and a look at a wall map of the interior of the station confirmed the impression. The underground area was vast, and included quite a lot of shops, including two long arcades. Harry's first thought was that there was nothing like this in London, but realized that he hadn't been in London enough to really know.

They walked around the station and the shopping areas for about an hour, Yasunori almost as much out of his element as Harry was. Yasunori explained that his family almost never visited Muggle areas, though his family had climbed Mt. Fuji, Japan's tallest mountain. Harry was impressed, but Yasunori explained that it wasn't a very tall mountain by global standards, and anyone in reasonably good health could climb it. He said it was one of the places in Japan that was important to both Muggles and wizards; Harry recalled that he had seen artwork related to the mountain in one of the wizarding shops.

"You could always Apparate to the top, though," commented Harry.

Yasunori gave him a peculiar look. "For us, the important thing is the effort involved in getting there, which would—" Interrupting himself, he sighed. "Is that one of those things you say to get a reaction?"

“Not exactly,” said a grinning Harry, “but I was kidding. It’s not for a reaction exactly, but it’s my way of saying, why go to all that effort when you don’t need to. I do know why, of course.”

“You’re just making fun of our culture,” observed Yasunori, his tone neutral.

Harry’s eyebrows went up; that was as sharp a comment as he’d ever heard from Yasunori. “I don’t mean to do that,” he said defensively. Yasunori was silent and expressionless as they walked on; Harry thought about what he’d said, trying to think about how it might be interpreted by someone who was proud of their culture.

“Look, I’m sorry,” said Harry. “I mean that. I guess it’s just a cultural thing; if someone criticized British culture, said something was silly or pointless, I wouldn’t care. Even if I disagreed, I wouldn’t take it personally. But I know I need to look at it as you would, not just as I would. It’s just hard to break habits.”

Yasunori shrugged. “Don’t worry about it; maybe I’m just being irritable. You know very well what Yosuke would say if you said that to him.”

Harry nodded. “He’d agree with me.”

“Exactly. Of course, his parents criticize him for not having enough respect for Japanese customs and traditions. And sometimes I get irritated with him, too.”

“And Yusuke never gets irritated at anything,” joked Harry.

Yasunori smiled. “Yes, that’s true. Everything just rolls off his back. But it just shows that despite our culture, we do think differently about things. We just act as if we’re the same.”

“Doesn’t that bother you sometimes?” asked Harry, genuinely curious. “Isn’t it difficult to act in a different way than you think so much?”

“You should ask Yosuke, he’d know better than me. I’m less different from most Japanese than him. Anyway, I don’t know. I suppose it

bothers me sometimes, but I've just gotten used to it. And also, it's only around elders, or people I don't know that well. It's not that big a deal. I mean, even for you, aren't there limits on what you can say to just anyone?"

"I suppose," Harry conceded. "You can't walk up to some girl and say, 'wow, you're ugly,' even if she is."

Yasunori looked appalled. "I would hope not."

"Well, that was an extreme example," said Harry, with a small grin at Yasunori's reaction, going on to explain that what each person felt comfortable saying depended more on the person than society's rules, and there was a wide variation. He talked about how Fred and George used to harass Percy, to Yasunori's amazement.

"I'm kind of curious to see one of the major shopping areas," said Harry. "Where would that be?"

"I don't know. Remember, I—"

"Haven't seen that much of the Muggle world, sorry. Could you ask someone?"

Yasunori looked startled. "Who?"

"I don't know, just anyone."

"I can't just walk up to someone I don't know and ask something like that!"

"Why—oh, never mind, I'll do it," said Harry, just having seen a Western-looking couple walking in their direction. Harry stepped towards them. "Excuse me," he said politely. "I was wondering if you could tell me what's the biggest or most famous shopping area around here?"

The couple, who appeared to be in their late twenties, exchanged a glance. "I guess Ginza, that's the most famous, and you can walk from here," the man said. "It would take ten or fifteen minutes."

“Or, most young people go to Shibuya,” the woman added helpfully. “It’s cheaper, and more interesting. Ginza is mostly for rich, or upper-middle-class older people.”

“Not necessarily,” protested the man.

“Well, anyway, you might try those two,” said the woman.

“Thanks very much, I appreciate it,” said Harry.

“No problem. Is this your first time in Tokyo?”

Harry nodded. “Yes, it is. I don’t know anything about it.”

The man gestured to Yasunori, who looked embarrassed. “Doesn’t he?”

“He’s... not from around here. We came to Tokyo together.”

“Oh, is it a homestay?” asked the woman, interested.

Guess that’s as good a way as any to say it, thought Harry. “Yes. Yes, it is. It’s been really interesting. The culture’s really different.”

“Oh, tell me about it,” agreed the woman. She identified Harry’s accent as British, said that she and her boyfriend were from Canada, there on working holiday visas, and they had talked for five minutes before Harry thanked them again and moved off to rejoin Yasunori.

“Okay, they said we should walk over there, past that kiosk, and out the exit straight ahead,” said Harry, starting to walk. “Then we see a big street, turn right, and it’ll lead us there.”

Yasunori looked at Harry as if something was very wrong. “What?” asked Harry.

“Those people... you had never met them before?”

“No, of course not.”

“But you talked for five minutes!”

Harry shrugged. “Well, they were friendly. You mean in Japan, you don’t have such a long chat with someone you just met?”

“I mean, we don’t talk to someone like that, at all. Not even to ask directions, never mind talk for so long. I can’t believe you did that! You just talked to each other, as if you’d known each other for a long time!”

Harry had been through this enough to not be shocked at yet another cultural difference. “Yes, we did. Sometimes we do that. Okay, well, not me so much, because if I walked up to someone in the wizarding world, the first thing they say is, ‘oh, Merlin, it’s Harry Potter!’ Makes me not want to do it. But for people who aren’t famous, sure, there’s no problem doing that. To tell you the truth, that was really nice, just to talk to people for a few minutes like that, and for them to have absolutely no idea who I am, I could just be anybody. That’s been very rare for me.”

Yasunori was silent for a minute, apparently baffled. Finally, he said, “I’m just surprised that there are so many foreign people around here.” Harry was about to protest that he’d seen no more than a dozen, out of maybe a few hundred people, when Yasunori went on, “I mean, there’ve been at least nine or ten, so far. Maybe this is some kind of place where foreign people congregate.”

“What we’ve seen doesn’t seem like that many,” said Harry as they walked up the stairs towards the street. “I guess you rarely see non-Japanese in your world.”

“It’s more like, almost never,” Yasunori corrected him. “That’s why you got so much attention at first, still do somewhat, although people are starting to get used to you now. For some people, you might as well be from another planet.”

Harry found himself tempted to tell Yasunori that some people in London were from other planets, wondering if Yasunori would believe

him, but decided it would be unkind. "Well, it probably isn't a bad thing for them to learn about foreigners."

Soon they had reached Ginza, and after a half hour of walking, Harry found that he wasn't so interested. There were several large department stores, mostly focused on clothing, and most of the small shops were restaurants or clothes shops of some sort. Yasunori was interested in the shops, but not what the shops sold. Harry decided he wanted to try Shibuya, and started looking for Westerners to ask how to get there; the first person didn't know, but the second told him how to get there by subway. As they headed for the subway station, Harry couldn't help but think, here I am walking around with a Japanese guy, and I have to be the one to figure out how to get around. He won't even talk to the Japanese Muggles.

On the subway, Harry was very interested to read the advertisements, especially the surprising frequency of English words; he had also noticed that many Ginza shops had English names. Yasunori, of course, was no help in explaining why this was, and Harry had seen no English in any public area in wizarding Japan.

Ten minutes into the ride, the man next to Harry got off the train, and a young woman sat next to him. To Harry's great surprise, she took out an English book and started reading it. Unable to restrain his curiosity, he decided to talk to her, being careful to turn off his artifact first. She appeared surprised that he had talked to her, but was polite, and friendly in a reserved way. He asked questions about Japan, and found that her English was a little better than Kaz's had been.

They talked for fifteen minutes, until they reached Shibuya. He thanked her for talking to him, then decided to ask one last question. "I heard that it's not usual here to talk to people you don't know. Is that true?"

She gave him a small, embarrassed smile. "Usually, we don't. But I know they do in your country, and I don't mind. I was able to practice my English. It was good to talk to you."

"You too," he said. She smiled again and went off. Harry put his artifact back on, turned to Yasunori and said, "It's okay, she's gone."

You can admit that you know me now. I know you don't like it when I break social protocol."

They walked in silence, Yasunori saying nothing. Harry wondered if he'd somehow offended Yasunori. "Are you okay?"

Yasunori nodded quickly, then spoke with the tone of someone who'd been debating whether to say something. "You know, she liked you."

Translation problem? "What do you mean, she liked me?"

Still embarrassed, Yasunori replied, "I mean, if you'd asked her out for a date, she probably would have said yes."

Harry was utterly mystified. "What makes you say that?"

"I... look, this is a secret, okay? Please don't tell a single person." Harry nodded earnestly. "You have an artifact that lets you understand Japanese." All foreign languages, thought Harry, but decided not to interrupt Yasunori with a nit-pick. "I have one too, this ring." He held up his right hand to show Harry the thin silver band on his ring finger. "It's an artifact that allows me to 'see' a person's body temperature, especially temperature variations. My father gave it to me when I was fifteen. Its purpose is to let me know when someone is lying, which it does well, though not perfectly. Usually, when someone lies, there's a little flush. Small, and it can be different with different people, but visible. It's to help me socially; if I know someone is lying, I can understand the true situation better.

"There are other things that cause a person's body temperature to suddenly change, and one of them is being attracted to someone. Other things can cause it, like being embarrassed, but I can tell the difference. Especially at the end, it was pretty clear. She was attracted to you."

Wow, thought Harry. Interesting. Pleased but embarrassed, he was suddenly curious. "Are you getting temperature variations from me now?"

Yasunori nodded. "You're embarrassed. I would be, too. I knew you would be, which is why I almost didn't tell you. But it's a good thing to know."

"Anyway, your artifact was off, so I couldn't understand what you were saying. What did she say?"

They walked down the steps from the platform. "She said, first of all, that everyone learns English in school from seventh grade to twelfth grade, it's one of the core subjects. Everyone has to take it."

Yasunori gaped. "You're kidding! You mean, all Japanese Muggles can speak English?"

"I asked that, and she said no. It's mainly to pass a college entrance test, she said, and they study reading and listening but not speaking. So, most of them can't speak all that well. They can read or understand a lot more than they can speak. As for the shop signs and advertisements, she said that English is considered 'cool,' a kind of fashion. A lot of it doesn't make sense, but she said that's not the point. Just the letters and words are kind of cool. And I asked how many foreigners are in Tokyo. She had no idea, but guessed about fifty or a hundred thousand, out of ten million in Tokyo."

"Fifty thousand?" exclaimed Yasunori. "Incredible. In wizarding Japan, there may be about... ten or fifteen people, I think."

"Is that all? No wonder my being here was such a big deal."

"Exactly," agreed Yasunori.

They stepped out of the station into a sea of people, most of them young; the first thing Harry noticed was the clothing. People wore more standard, conservative clothing in Ginza, but here, there was a great variety of fashions worn, almost all casual. Young women wore eye-catching makeup; people wore t-shirts with nonsensical English. Harry glanced at an obviously awestruck Yasunori, then noticed a statue of a dog, which many people were looking at, or standing near. He wandered over, keeping an eye on Yasunori, asked a foreign bystander about it, then came back to Yasunori.

“Pretty interesting, huh?”

“I... had no idea that Muggle Japan was like this.” They walked toward the vast, pentagonal crosswalk near the station building. “I’ve heard people say things like, we don’t want to end up like the Japanese Muggles. Now, I understand why.”

“What’s wrong with this?”

Mildly annoyed at the question, Yasunori answered, “I think you know, or can guess.”

Harry shrugged. “Okay, kind of. It’s different, and for you, different is bad.”

“Not only different, but... really different, and really strange. What was the situation with that statue?”

“The guy I asked—he was British too, judging by his accent—said that when people meet around here, they meet at that statue. The dog, apparently, many years ago waited for its master at the station every day, and walked home with him. The man died, but the dog kept waiting at the station, every day, until it died. The guy said that Japanese made the statue because the dog was famous for its loyalty, and loyalty is important to Japanese.”

“At least we have that in common,” mused Yasunori.

Two hours spent walking around Shibuya cemented Yasunori’s opinion that Muggle Japan was a very strange place, but it was very interesting for Harry. The shops were far more varied than Ginza’s, and he and Yasunori had lunch at a Japanese fast food restaurant, having burgers and fries. Harry felt the food was of barely adequate quality, but a welcome change from the steady and somewhat boring diet of mostly fish-based Japanese food he’d been eating. Yasunori appeared to barely tolerate the food, but he ate it.

Harry asked a foreign bystander how to get to the area of Tokyo where there was a lot of skyscrapers, and he and Yasunori walked

back to the station. "Look," said Harry uncomfortably, "there's one more thing I want to do while I'm here today. There's a guy I met my first day here; he lives not far from where those skyscrapers are. I'd like to visit him, see how he's doing. But I'm not sure he'd want someone in his home he didn't know, at least at first. So..." Harry let the sentence hang, hoping that Yasunori would get his drift.

"I understand," said Yasunori. "It was not your idea that I come along, after all."

"Don't get me wrong," said Harry. "I'm glad you came. It's better to do this with someone. But just for this, I don't want it to be awkward."

"What is his name?"

"He didn't say his last name; his first name is Hirokazu."

"He is a wizard?" Harry nodded. "Then I could not see him anyway; he is ronin. I cannot visit or spend time with such a person."

"Why not?"

Yasunori didn't react, but from his tone, Harry guessed that he wasn't happy. "You have a tendency to ask questions that you should be able to guess the answers to."

Harry shrugged. "Isn't it easier for you to answer than for me to guess?"

"I suppose. Maybe I notice it more when it is a sensitive topic."

"Why is this a—" Harry cut himself off, with a self-deprecating grin. "Okay, I'll try to guess. You can't see him because the whole point of being a ronin is that you're cut off from society. And it's sensitive because... the fact that they exist doesn't make your society look good?"

"The first, yes. The second, more or less. Partly that, and also that we're saddened that such a thing is necessary. We prefer not to talk about it."

Struck by a sudden concern, Harry asked, "It isn't actually illegal to visit one, is it?"

Yasunori bought his ticket for the train, then waited for Harry to do so. "Another cultural difference. You ask whether something is illegal; we would ask whether it is inappropriate, or whether it would cause trouble."

Harry wondered whether this was an observation or a criticism. "I'm going to take that as a no." As they walked through the ticket gate, Harry understood Yasunori's meaning: he shouldn't go. Too bad, he thought, I'm going anyway. He seemed like a nice enough guy, and I'll apply my own judgments about whether or not I'll see him. I may be staying with Japanese people, but I'm not Japanese. I know they'd think I should act as if I was, while I'm there. But I'm not going to.

* * * * *

It was agreed that Yasunori would walk around on his own while Harry was visiting Kaz, though he would observe from a distance Harry knocking on Kaz's door, in case Kaz wasn't home or didn't want to see Harry. Harry remembered the way to Kaz's home from the last time. He walked up the stairs to the fourth floor, and knocked on the door.

There was a fairly long silence. Maybe he's not home, thought Harry, or maybe he doesn't want to see anyone. He was about to try again when the door slowly opened a few inches, but no one could be seen.

"Kaz? It's me, Harry."

The door suddenly opened, and Kaz gaped at Harry. "Harry!"

"Yeah, it's me. I just wanted to see how you were doing."

Kaz just stared, then finally seemed to recover. "Would you like to come in?"

“Yeah, thanks,” said Harry, and stepped inside. They walked to the living room, but instead of asking Harry to sit down, Kaz just looked at him, still shocked. “Why are you here?”

“Um... like I said, I just wanted to see how you were doing. I hoped I didn't get you into any trouble before.”

Kaz grunted in embarrassment. “It's funny that you would say that, since I was the one who Disapparated, and left you alone to face those guys. I felt bad about that, and I want to apologize.”

“No big deal,” said Harry, trying to be magnanimous while knowing that he never would have done such a thing. “I could have taken them anyway, I just didn't know that a Stunning Spell was illegal, and would bring the Aurors. I just meant that I had to tell them that I'd met you. I would've rather not, but I felt like lying to Aurors while in the country illegally wasn't the thing to do.”

Kaz finally gestured to Harry to sit. “You didn't tell them about Chieko, though. Why didn't you?”

“I wasn't going to lie to them, but I wasn't going to give them information they didn't ask for. They never asked if there was anyone with you.”

“Well, I appreciate it. It would have caused a lot of problems if you had told them.”

Harry decided to be more direct. “Because you're a ronin?”

Kaz glanced at him sharply, then looked down. “They told you?”

“No, I figured it out. Japanese society is really cohesive, and you're in the Muggle world, living by yourself. It wasn't hard to work out. I assume you know that I don't care.”

Kaz nodded. “I could guess. Anyway... Japanese wizards aren't supposed to spend time with ronin. But, she does it. If she was found out...”

“She’d be ronin too.”

“Well, they’d give her one chance. She thinks, anyway, and she’s probably right. They’d give her a huge lecture, her patriarch would get involved, maybe even the local magistrate. And if it happened again, that would be that.”

Harry understood the situation. She had to love him, or else she wouldn’t take such chances. He no doubt loved her, but was torn between his feelings for her and his concern that she would suffer his fate. If I was him, thought Harry, part of me would want her to join me, and maybe I’d be ashamed of myself for wanting it, since it would mean that she’d be cut off from her society. I wouldn’t want to be in their shoes, either of them.

He knew from all he’d heard from Yasunori that he shouldn’t ask the question, but he decided to ask anyway. “Kaz... why did they make you a ronin?”

Kaz’s eyes met Harry’s for a few seconds, then he looked away. “It’s very... Western of you to just come out and ask like that. Japanese would never dream of doing that. They’d find out some other way. First, why do you ask? Just curious?”

“Well, I am curious, but I wouldn’t ask just for that reason. The people I’m staying with aren’t going to be happy that I visited you. I don’t think they have any right to stop me, but I expect them to say something like you’re a bad influence on Japanese society, I might get negative ideas from you, and so forth. But they probably wouldn’t tell me what you did, even if they knew. So, I’d like to be able to say that I know what you did, and I don’t care.”

Kaz slowly nodded. “That makes sense, in your way, anyway. They probably would say what you said. Sato may not be conservative, for a Japanese wizard, but he’s conservative enough.” Noting Harry’s surprise, Kaz added, “Yes, I know who you’re staying with. You’re gossiped about in certain parts of Japanese society, and Chieko has been keeping her ear to the ground. Her... cousin’s friend’s brother is a third-year student at the tactical school, and she’s been asking for regular updates.

“Anyway, of course, I know Sato. I would have to; he’s the deputy minister for English-speaking countries, and I went to an English-speaking country. I met him several times, listened to some lectures from him, and had to submit monthly reports when I was in America.”

“Monthly reports?” exclaimed Harry. “That makes it seem like it’s a job.”

“The purpose is to make sure you’re not ‘going native.’ Sato didn’t tell me this, but if you don’t submit the reports, or if the tone changes, they yank you back. I’m an example of what they consider the grave risk of Japanese spending time overseas: I liked it better there, and when I came back, found Japanese society too confining. I tried, but it was very difficult for me to fit in anymore.”

“And they made you a ronin for that?”

“No, but I suspect it would have happened anyway. I’d never gotten along with my father all that much. He was very strict, never said anything nice or kind, and really got all over me when I started acting up. Bear in mind, in Japan, not bowing low enough in certain situations or asking the wrong question at the wrong time are considered ‘acting up,’ but a Westerner would be amazed at what they get upset about. Anyway, to make a long story short, things built up with him badly, and I had a lot of resentment. On my twentieth birthday, I had the—do you know about the Antiquity Link?” Harry nodded.

“I suppose you would, by now,” said Kaz. “I had the ceremony where I establish the Link with my father. I really didn’t want to do it, because I was so angry with him. But I felt I had to. Over the next few months, things got worse, he was yelling at me almost every day, referring to me as ‘my American son.’ I held in my anger at him, but I found out you can only hold in anger for so long. One day, I just lost it, and... I broke the Antiquity Link with him.”

Wow, thought Harry. “I... guess that’s a pretty big thing.”

Kaz grunted. "That's a massive understatement. Once a thread of the Antiquity Link is broken, it can't be re-established. That's it. And what was worse, I was his only child. So, his line ends with me. Breaking the Antiquity Link is an enormous offense, it's like..." He gestured with his right hand, raising his middle finger in a gesture he'd no doubt learned in America. "It's like doing this to society. It's considered to be unforgivable."

"Chieko was your girlfriend then?"

He nodded. "We were seriously thinking about getting married." Harry cringed inwardly as the loss Kaz had suffered. "At first she was furious that I did this, messed up our future, but at the same time, she knew what I'd been through with my father, and we think both sets of parents would have opposed our getting married anyway. The whole situation... as the Americans would say, it sucked. Sometimes I wish I had never gone to America, and sometimes I'm glad I had the opportunity, even though this happened, because for once in my life, I got to be free. In America, I suppose in England too, you can do any damn thing you want. That was such an amazing thing, and once I had it, I couldn't let go. I'm amazed that this doesn't happen to everyone who goes to a Western country."

"Did other ronin become that way for similar reasons?" asked Harry.

"Not really. I think only one of them has been overseas. They just couldn't get along in Japanese society for their own reasons."

"Why don't you just go and live in America?"

"I can't. Any country that Japan has exchange programs with has to agree not to keep anyone who isn't authorized to be there. Also, it's very hard to leave the country. You'd have to do it by Muggle methods, and you can't get a passport, because you don't have a Muggle birth certificate."

"Do what I did. Just Apparate onto a plane."

"I assume you did some spell on the people on the plane, to make them think you were supposed to be there. That kind of spell is illegal

here; they'd detect it and catch you. Also, I don't know how to do those spells anyway. No, we're locked up tight. It's like being free, but being in prison at the same time."

"How do you make a living?" Harry wondered.

Kaz looked distinctly displeased with the question. "Theft. Except for the kind of day-to-day, unofficial physical labor that they have to import people from poor countries to do because even Japanese Muggles won't do it, there's no job we can get without Muggle identification, which we can't get. We don't steal from individuals, at least, I don't. Banks, mostly. They can afford it. Wizarding society knows, of course; they make it so we have no choice. Their attitude is that there aren't so many of us, so having us steal is a way of making Muggles foot the bill for us. They could make it so we could get Muggle identification, live in Muggle society, but they won't. They want us to steal so we feel as though we're criminals, because that's how they see us."

Harry closed his eyes and shook his head. "When I first got here, I wouldn't have believed that. But after... I guess it's almost a month now... I can believe it. I'm really sorry."

"Thanks," said Kaz. "So, tell me what's been happening with you. I've heard some of it, of course, but I'd like to hear it from you."

Harry spent the next hour recounting his experiences so far in Japan, Kaz interrupting once in a while to ask questions. Sometimes a question would spiral off into a discussion of one of the many cultural differences Harry ran into, which would remind Kaz of the opposite experiences he'd had in America. Kaz burst into uproarious laughter when Harry told him about the time Fred had appeared in the Sato family shrine. "Oh, it's so funny... I'm sure they acted as if nothing was wrong, but they must have been going crazy on the inside. The shrine is the most sacred place in a Japanese home, and for someone like him to come out, making jokes..."

Harry was glad he could provide Kaz with a good laugh. "I guess they would be surprised, considering what Japanese ghosts usually act

like. I've heard that not everyone thinks it's so great to talk to the 'honored ancestors,' even if they have to pretend that it is."

"That's one of the stupidest things about Japanese life, if you ask me," said Kaz disgustedly. "I'm sorry I broke the Antiquity Link because it got me exiled, but I'm not sorry I don't get to talk to my ancestors. They never had anything interesting or valuable to say, like you said about the one you talked to. They don't have a clue, at least not in my family."

His voice dropped low, as if he feared being overheard. "I've been talking to some other ronin about this. Don't ask me how, but one of them got ahold of a shrine, and has been using it to talk to various ghosts, even ones he's not related to. He says there's a lot of ghosts who don't want to be there, who want to just move on."

"Why don't they?"

"They can't. I didn't know this... Japanese society says that they stay so they can help their descendants, that they want to, and the Antiquity Link just helps them do so. But this ronin I talked to says that maybe some want to stay, but in any case, they have to stay; the Antiquity Link functions as a trap, and even if they wanted to move on, they couldn't. I'm sure the Japanese government would deny this; they may not even know. But this guy swears it's true, and that it's why a lot of ghosts aren't that helpful. They're sick of hanging around. In America, there were very few ghosts, and the ones there were, people seemed sorry for them. How about in England?"

Harry explained what Nick had told him two years before, and recounted Fred's experience right after his death. Kaz nodded. "That pretty well supports what this guy said. You said that Fred said that the natural human tendency is to want to move on. Well, Japanese can't. I'm sure many of them deal with it as best they can, mainly talking to other people, I'd guess. But I must say, hearing that, it almost makes me glad I broke my Antiquity Link. When I die, I'll be able to just move on, like you're supposed to."

"If the Japanese ghosts don't want to stay around, why don't they say so? Why don't they tell people how they feel?"

Kaz looked at him in surprise. "You've been here for almost a month, and you don't know the answer to that question?"

"Well, I would know for living people," protested Harry. "They're supposed to pretend they agree with what society does, even if they don't. But why should ghosts care what Japanese society thinks of them? They're ghosts."

Kaz shrugged. "They have a social structure too. You may be dead, but you still have the psychology you grew up with, the customs. Doing what you're supposed to do may be so ingrained in them that they don't think to question it, even after death, even if they're miserable. I can't know, but I think it's a reasonable guess."

They talked more about the Antiquity Link, and about Japan, America, and England. Finally, regretfully, Harry had to tell Kaz he would have to leave; he felt bad because he was sure Kaz was happy for the company. He said he would try to visit again, but of course, couldn't guarantee anything. He left with a heavy heart, wishing something could be done for Kaz and people like him.

* * * * *

"Of course, it is very regrettable," said Sato two hours later over dinner. "We wish it did not have to happen."

"But it doesn't have to happen," argued Harry. "They could be allowed to live as normal Muggles do, or to leave the country. So, why not?"

"They turned their backs on our society," said Sato's mother. "Why should they be comfortable?"

Harry held his tongue, knowing it would be considered very impolite to argue directly with the oldest person in the house. Sato spoke again. "There would be some people who agree with you." Harry got the feeling that Sato himself might be one, but he wasn't sure. "The argument against such leniency would be that becoming ronin is a punishment, and so should not be more comfortable than it currently is. The harsh life of a ronin very likely exists as a deterrent to those

who might rebel against society. In any case, it has been this way for many years, and it is difficult for such things to change.”

Harry sighed. “It’s just... hard to talk to him for a few hours, and not think that his situation, how he has to live his life, is an unjust punishment for what he did.”

Sato nodded. “It speaks well of you that you have such sympathy. Many would agree with you, at least in principle, which is probably part of the reason that we are not to visit such people, lest we take pity on them.” Harry noticed that Sato avoided words like ‘forbidden’ or ‘illegal,’ so Yasunori must have been right about it not being strictly illegal. “But you may want to consider the wider scale, the extent to which there is suffering in each country. Suffering is, sadly, a seemingly inescapable part of human existence, and is widely present in every country.” Sato spoke earnestly, as if devoutly hoping Harry would understand and agree with his point.

“In wizarding America, for example, there are currently three times as many people, per capita, incarcerated than in Japan, even if one includes both wizarding jail and ronin. In such a socially loose society, it is much easier for people to fall through the cracks. Children may be neglected, treated badly, brought up in poor conditions. Poorly supervised teenagers may not receive the proper guidance, fall in with bad elements, and turn to crime. Even adults may behave selfishly and destructively, with no one empowered to give them forceful guidance, or have influence over them. With our tightly-knit society, we almost completely avoid such situations.

“Unfortunately, human nature being what it is—and to be honest, it is little different here than anywhere else—enforcement of social norms simply cannot be avoided. We are a culture that prefers persuasion to coercion, so coercion is a last resort. But for acts that society considers shocking—such as breaking the Antiquity Link—most feel that if we did not take firm action, people would feel that it was all right to do such things. Breaking the Antiquity Link is irreversible, so the punishment is as well. If it were not, people could break it with relative impunity, possibly leading to the breakdown of one of the most important and unique aspects of our society.”

Harry dearly wanted to tell Sato what Kaz had told him about the ronin's talks with the ghosts, but he knew he couldn't, as it would not only violate Kaz's confidence, but cause the Japanese authorities to vigorously investigate the ronin community until they discovered the stolen shrine.

"I guess I see what you mean... it's just hard to see beyond your own culture and accept that what for us wouldn't be a big crime is for you. It's hard not to see it as an injustice. I wonder how much going to America had to do with what happened."

Now, Harry saw definite sadness on Sato's face. Before he could speak, his wife did. "It's not your fault," she said kindly but firmly. Harry's face registered his confusion.

"My very kind wife is referring to the fact that due to my position, I was one of two people responsible for Harada's visit to America." Harry gathered that Harada was Kaz's last name. "The other was a deputy culture minister. We were both responsible for his oversight while he was there, to the extent that such oversight can really happen. It was our job to see signs of his losing touch with his Japanese values, and to bring him home if that seemed to be happening. The deputy culture minister, Uchida-san, at one point felt that there were subtle signs that this was happening. We met with him, and he assured us that this was not the case. Uchida-san wanted to bring him home, but I disagreed, and unanimity was required to do so; he stayed. After what happened later, of course I could not help but feel that had I decided differently, things would have gone differently."

Most of the Satos were looking down; Harry felt extremely awkward. "I'm sorry, I had no idea that..." He shrugged helplessly. He now remembered that Kaz had mentioned Sato's involvement, but he hadn't put two and two together.

"You could not know," said Sato, rather generously, Harry felt. "It is not difficult to unknowingly step on what is for someone else a sensitive spot." He paused, then added, "As your country's Foreign Minister did with you recently."

Hard to argue with that, thought Harry ruefully. Of course, it wasn't Shelton I was angry with, it was Kingsley. Still, it's a reasonable point. "I understand."

To Harry's surprise, Sato went on to answer his question. "Of course, we cannot say for certain how much Harada's trip to America had to do with his later behavior; as is often the case, multiple factors were involved. In interviews with his family before he left, a picture of perfect family harmony was painted for us; we later, too late, learned that this was far from true. His father had not taken an active role in his son's social and moral education, relying exclusively on criticism rather than positive reinforcement. This tendency only accelerated upon his son's return, and his actions were an integral element in what later occurred. It is almost as much a tragedy for the father as for the son; unless he is in deep denial, he knows his responsibility, and as Hirokazu was his only son, and his father had no brothers, he will likely be summoned by no one once he becomes an honored spirit; he will be no one's ancestor."

"We call such a person an 'orphaned spirit,'" said Sato's mother sadly. "Usually, it happens due to being childless. We consider it a very unfortunate fate."

"It points up the interconnectedness of our society, and the fact that there is a great deal of collective responsibility," said Sato. "Children are responsible for listening to and obeying their parents and elders, but elders are no less responsible for giving proper advice and guidance. It is a two-way street, and we are responsible for each other. Harry-san... is there someone of your acquaintance who did not end up as he should have, or who suffered from insufficient or poor parental guidance?"

"Well, me," said Harry, only half-joking, and went on to explain the Dursleys' treatment of him, to the Satos' shocked expressions. "They were indulgent toward their own son, but as Professor Dumbledore said to them, they may have done him a worse disservice than they did me. Anyway, I seem to have ended up okay, but it was difficult that there was never really anyone looking out for me. Professor Dumbledore tried to, but I wasn't his son, and there was only so much he could do."

“But to answer the question, I would mention a same-year student named Draco Malfoy. Sato-san, I assume you’re familiar with his parents, from the newspaper at least.”

Sato nodded. “I met his father once, at a governmental social event. I found him... chilling, the easy, casual, subtle malevolence he exuded. I was stunned that one such as him could have influence in the government. I can only imagine what kind of father he was.”

Harry told them much of what Draco had told him about his upbringing, and the events of the sixth and seventh years, including his confrontation with Dumbledore. “Professor Dumbledore had hopes that Draco could overcome his upbringing, and so far, that seems to be the case. But I was able to see very closely what can happen when you get the wrong kind of upbringing.”

“Amazing,” said Yasunori. “Such events could never happen here. I don’t mean bad upbringing, I mean, the environment that produced Voldemort, and all that happened because of it.”

“Probably not,” agreed his father, “but we must never be overconfident. And as for Malfoy... Harry-san, it was very kind of you to take an interest in his welfare, even after your negative history with him.”

“Well, it was mainly because of Professor Dumbledore.”

“Exactly; that is an excellent example of what we seek in authority figures. They teach by their words, and by their example. When you have children, Harry-san, they will look to you the same way. You, and of course Yasunori and Masako, must always keep in mind that your actions will always be seen as an example by those who look to you for leadership. For their sake, you should consider your actions carefully, and... forgive the cliché, but, do your best.” With a small grin, he added, “Sometimes clichés are there for a reason.”

Harry couldn’t help but think about the fact that if he were to go back to England, a lot of people other than potential future children might be looking at his actions as an example to be followed. Yeah, well,

that's part of why I'm here, he thought. I don't know if I can deal with that.

* * * * *

The weeks flew by; Harry's eighteenth birthday passed unobserved, which was fine with him. He studied, productively practiced dueling with Takenaka once a week, and unproductively practiced group spells with the three Y's who, to his surprise, never expressed annoyance or suggested giving up. He read the books Sato had bought for him, and except for his discomfort with the punishment that had been handed out to Kaz, for the time being, he could live within the rules of Japanese wizarding society. Just as long as they don't try to tell me who I should marry, he thought wryly.

He started a custom of going to the Muggle world once a week, every Saturday or Sunday afternoon. Yasunori didn't go with him again; he assumed the Satos knew he was visiting Kaz, but they said nothing about it. Harry imagined that this was how things were done in Japan: if Sato knew he was visiting a ronin, he would feel obliged to tell Harry he shouldn't, putting Harry in the position of not doing something he felt was the right thing to do, or defying the advice of a senior. Pretending not to know, Sato bore no responsibility for Harry's actions.

Kaz and Harry went out to walk around Muggle Tokyo sometimes, discussing the difference between the Japanese Muggle and wizarding worlds, which Kaz explained was quite substantial. Kaz said that he had become friendly with a group of like-minded ronin; Harry wondered if some of them were the ones who had been harassing him before, but didn't ask. These ronin, the ones who had access to the stolen shrine, were telling Kaz of a growing feeling communicated to them by some of the Japanese spirits that they weren't happy where they were, and that the spirits had been hinting that a way might be found to escape the bonds of the Antiquity Link and move on so they wouldn't have to suffer another half-century of boredom while they waited for the living descendants to call on them in what had become far more a ceremonial duty than a genuine wish to commune with the ancestors' spirits. Harry sympathized with the rebellious ghosts, and hoped they would start making their wishes

known to those around them. Maybe they can change the system, he thought, but then realized it wasn't likely. Change came to this country very slowly.

* * * * *

Sato took a Portkey from his home to the office after dinner on a Friday night in late August. His family was well used to this, as the time differences with North America and the U.K. sometimes required him to work at odd hours. He went to the international travel section, and was soon walking across the Asian and European continents in two minutes, as he'd done so many times before. Emerging in the British Foreign Ministry, he greeted the staff and headed off to his appointment.

He hadn't wanted to bother the Minister at such a difficult time, and four hours ago had left word with Arthur Weasley that he wanted to see the Minister, but he completely understood if the Minister wanted to put it off for some time. To his surprise, just before he left for home that evening, he got word that the Minister would see him at noon, England time.

When he reached the office, Darlene waved him into the Minister's office immediately; the two men shook hands and sat.

"Minister," said Sato, "First, please allow me to convey the deep condolences of my government over yesterday's terrible events."

"Thank you," said Kingsley politely. Sato could see the toll the disaster had taken on Kingsley; compared to their meeting two months before, Kingsley looked beaten down and distraught, though he hid it from his face; again, it was in his eyes. Sato wanted to tell him that what had happened was not his fault, but in addition to his not knowing for sure that it was true, was in any case not his place to say.

"I assume that you've had offers of help from other countries," said Sato. "I wish we could offer, but the uniqueness of our country's culture would make it very difficult."

Kingsley nodded. "I can understand that, and I thank you for the sentiment. Yes, the wizarding governments of the English-speaking countries, and a few European governments, have offered their help. We are considering their offers. As you can imagine, we hesitate to give such responsibility to outsiders, but of course we may have little choice. I'm considering accepting their offers, if only so that if things go badly, the new Minister has the option to change course, and I would take the political blame for having made the decision."

"I'm sorry, Minister, I did not know that a change was imminent."

"Not officially," Kingsley clarified, "but at this point, it's just a matter of time. The Council won't want to do it so soon after this kind of tragedy, but after the dust settles, so to speak, everyone expects that a change will be made. There's been no progress with the dementors, and now this... anyway, may I assume you're here about Harry?"

"Yes, Minister. It occurs to me that now, more than ever, he could be the unifying force that your country clearly needs. Not to mention the fact that if your country ever needed an Auror Leader, one who happens to be a national hero, that time is now."

"Have you told him what happened?"

"No, not yet. I would have, but I was waiting for your guidance."

Kingsley shook his head. "Don't tell him."

Sato had half-expected the answer, but was still surprised. "But, Minister—"

"No," said Kingsley, more firmly. "When he's ready, he'll come back. If he hears about this, he might come back out of a sense of obligation, but I think it would be bad if he came back for that reason. When he comes back, he'll practically be carrying the whole country on his shoulders. That's a lot for anyone, never mind what he's already been through. He has to be ready."

Sato found that though he disagreed with Kingsley, he admired his determination. "But would it not be better for him, as Auror Leader, to

have a Minister who was his ally, rather than a more standard politician, who would look for ways to use him politically?”

“You may not understand the power of the Auror Leader. No matter who it is, he has vast influence. That’ll be doubled with it being Harry, already a national hero. Whoever the Minister is will be scrambling to stay in Harry’s good graces; it won’t matter whether it’s me or not. Harry will be the boss.”

Sato decided to try again. “But surely, when the need is so great, the needs of the individual must be subordinate to the needs of the group.”

“That’s one of your cultural precepts, I gather. Well, it isn’t ours. I mean, to some extent, some people would generally accept it, but it always depends greatly on the circumstances. Harry has already literally given his life for this country, and been put through a hellish ordeal because of me. I simply will not ask anything more of him until he is ready. If most people knew my general situation, they would call him back. But if they knew everything I know, all of what he’s been through... I do believe most people would agree with my decision. He’s more than earned such consideration, and for now, we’ll have to get through this without him.”

Sato wondered whether Kingsley’s attitude would be different if he were not personally responsible for whatever ordeal Harry had suffered in the test for Auror Leader; it seemed clear that Kingsley’s conscience disturbed him greatly. Still, Sato had to accept the fact that it was Kingsley’s decision, not his. Amazing, Sato thought, that he can refrain from using a resource that could greatly help his people, all for the consideration of one person. In Japan, it would be unthinkable. It would be assumed that he would want to help, no matter his personal situation.

“Very well, Minister. I remain at your disposal if there is anything I can do.”

They both stood, and shook hands. “And Mr. Sato, what I said before still goes. When I lose my job, please tell Harry immediately.”

“I will, Minister. Thank you.”

* * * * *

Two days later, early Sunday evening, Harry and Kaz sat next to each other on a Tokyo train. Kaz had told him that there was a popular local festival called awa-odori in an area of Tokyo called Koenji, which was not far from where Kaz lived. They had spent a lot of the afternoon at home with Chieko, but she hadn't wanted to go with them. Harry realized that she had never been with them in public; it seemed fairly clear that she was worried about the danger of being seen with Kaz in public, even though the chances of a Japanese wizard venturing into the Muggle world and seeing them together were very small.

“How's it going at the tactical school?” asked Kaz in English, which he still tried to use with Harry as much as possible, especially when Chieko wasn't around.

“Not too good,” replied Harry. “I mean, what I'm learning is interesting—the way to use group spells in tactical situations—but as I've told you, I haven't been able to do the group spells.”

“Are your friends angry with you?”

“You're Japanese. What would you guess?”

Kaz slowly nodded. “They are not happy with you, but would never say such a thing. Their idea is just to practice harder. Is that right?”

“They did that for a month,” affirmed Harry. “But they sort of gave up on it at some point. I think they just accept the fact that our group isn't going to do well with the end-of-term testing this Friday. So, there's really nothing you can tell me about being able to do that?” Harry thought he had already asked for Kaz's advice, but wasn't sure.

“No, I can't,” replied Kaz. “I think it is a matter of being on the same wavelength as them. That would be difficult for you, of course.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. "I'm surprised you know that word. Wavelength."

"I learned it in America, of course. A few of the wizards I knew were interested in Muggle life; I learned it from them."

"Did you see any festivals in America?"

"I saw one; the theme was the Salem witch trials. Have you ever heard of that?"

"It was talked about in History of Magic a little, I think. We have the word 'witch-hunt,' I guess it comes from America, meaning to find someone to accuse of something whether they did it or not. I imagine it comes from that time."

"Yes, it does. The festival is mostly humorous," said Kaz, switching back to Japanese, as he did when he wanted to say something more difficult. "There's an event called the 'witch hunt,' in which witches who've been Disillusioned are chased by men dressed up in the costumes of the time, who deliberately look and act foolish, as they imagine the people who hunted witches did back then. It was quite a cultural shock for me to see a festival at which a people's ancestors are mocked and ridiculed."

Harry chuckled. "I'll bet. So in Japan, the ancestors can do no wrong? There are no records, no stories, of ancestors who did stupid things?"

"Not really," said Kaz. "In history classes, they emphasize the good things the ancestors did. If there's any reference to bad decisions being made, it's usually with some explanation, like, 'it was the best decision that could be made, with the information available at the time,' like that. We knew that it wasn't really true, that it was just a bad decision. It's part of Japanese culture's reverence for the ancestors. They consider it bad form to say anything bad about them at all."

Harry had noticed that when Kaz spoke about Japan or Japanese, he used words like 'Japanese' or 'they,' whereas a Japanese citizen in

good standing never failed to use 'we' or 'us' when talking about Japan. Again, Harry felt saddened at Kaz's fate.

They had arrived at Koenji station, and got off the train. Apparently, this was a popular festival; Kaz had said that this wasn't a station with a lot of traffic, but so many people got off at that stop that it took almost five minutes just for them to make their way down the stairs and out of the station.

They walked to the north side of the station, slowly making their way through a crowd of people. The place, Harry felt, was like an assault on the senses. Old-fashioned Japanese drums and music blared over the hundreds of conversations, some held loudly, that were going on all over, and people manning food stands shouted greetings in attempts to attract attention and customers. The smell was of the food they sold, mostly a fishy smell, and to top it all off, it was a hot and very humid evening. People constantly bumped into Harry as he and Kaz made their way forward.

"So, you said the purpose of this festival is to honor the ancestors?" asked Harry, raising his voice to be heard.

"Originally, it was," replied Kaz. "But now it's more or less just a festival, with no particular meaning. A few people consider it for its meaning, but it's a lot like Christmas in America. It's supposed to be a religious holiday, but people think mostly about decorations and presents. This is a little like that."

Harry could vaguely see, twenty meters or so ahead, a group of people in traditional clothes dancing a slow, stylized dance. It was hard to see through the crowd, even though he was taller than most Japanese.

Suddenly he heard a man shouting, "Hiro! Hiro!" He would have dismissed it as one of the Japanese Muggles looking for another, but Kaz started looking around, and grabbing Harry's arm, headed in the man's direction.

"Naoki!" Kaz greeted him in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

“There’s big news. Come on.” As they walked through the crowd towards the nearest building, Naoki asked, “This is the foreigner you were telling us about?”

“Yes,” said Kaz.

Reaching a sidewalk, the three slid into the small space between two buildings; Kaz put up a spell that caused it to look to observers as if nothing was happening there. “How do you feel about the Antiquity Link?” Naoki asked Harry.

Surprised at the sudden turn of events, Harry shrugged. “I think it’s kind of strange. It could be good in some cases, but if I were a ghost, I’d want to have a choice whether I stayed around or not.”

Naoki nodded. “Good enough. Come on, you’ll want to see this.” He proffered a portable Portkey to Kaz; he grabbed Harry’s arm and took it.

The three were suddenly in what seemed like a rural area, twenty meters from a small building, which Naoki started heading towards. “We can’t go in, only the senior ones are operating the shrine. But we can listen.”

Harry suddenly wondered whether it was advisable for him to be anywhere near a stolen shrine, but curiosity made him follow his companions. They walked up to where a van was parked near the small house, which looked like it hadn’t been lived in for decades. Naoki motioned for them to be quiet so they could hear, but Harry found that hearing would be easy. A ghost was speaking.

“...exactly the right time to make our bid for freedom. We perform like monkeys for our masters/descendants, at a festival that is supposedly in our honor! It is a bitter irony, but it will be for the last time.”

A human voice inside spoke. “Will it work, honored ancestor? Is everything arranged?”

“You may be assured, young one, that it will work. We have been in consultation with the others. They have explained what will happen,

and the method by which it is to be accomplished. You need only do your part, as we have asked of you. In return, you will be doing your countrymen, those who have cast you out, a great service. They will not appreciate it at first, but once they end their physical existence, they will appreciate it greatly. To be free! To go on to the blissful afterlife! It will be such a relief—

“I am told that outside, listening, is one from a land where the spirits are free. Please come in, there are a few questions.”

Alarmed, Harry looked back and forth to the two Japanese around him. “I shouldn’t go in there! I shouldn’t even be here!”

“Harry, it’s just a ghost!” said Kaz. “He wants to talk to you! What’s the harm?”

All kinds of things, thought Harry, but against his better judgment decided to go in anyway. “You come with me, at least,” he instructed Kaz, who followed Harry, a few steps behind.

He walked into the dilapidated structure; a few magically-generated artificial lights provided what little illumination there was. A shrine sat on a coffee table in the middle of the room; above it hovered a ghost. Surrounding it were five Japanese men, ranging in age from thirty to forty; they pointed their wands at Harry, whose wand was already out. “Put your wand away,” said one.

Not a chance, thought Harry. “You first,” he responded.

“Young men, put your wands away,” instructed the ghost. “I requested the young man’s presence.” Reluctantly, they did so. Harry did too, but kept it within ready reach, and made sure that if any of them moved for theirs, he would move for his.

He looked up at the ghost. “Hello. I’m Harry Potter.”

“My name was Gantaro Morishita, but it seems to matter less and less with each year,” responded the ghost. “Where are you from, young man?”

“England.”

“Are there ghosts in England?”

“Only a few. Most people when they die, just move on.”

The ghost’s face took on an if-only-I-could-be-so-lucky expression. “Those who stay, why do they stay?”

Harry shrugged. “I’m not an expert, but I’ve been told, by a ghost, that they’re sort of afraid to move on, they like it where they are now. A lot of them have emotional problems of some sort, which is part of the reason they stay.”

“A purgatory!” cried the ghost. “A purgatory on Earth, is it not?”

Harry couldn’t disagree with the ghost, but was a little unnerved at his overt emotionalism. Then again, he thought, if I’d been trapped the way he has for seventy or eighty years, maybe I’d be emotional too. “Well, it’s not for me to say, but yes, it seems that way. For a lot of them, it just seems like they’re mired in their own sadness, and it feels like they’d be happier if they moved on.”

“Yes! He understands! Only someone who comes from other lands, who knows what is the natural state of ghosts, who has not been brainwashed by our society, can understand the truth! Oh, young man, what sprang naturally from your lips I have labored for so long to tell others, to little or no avail. We are shackled, chained here by that hideous spell. I tell you, the Antiquity Links are the true ‘chains of society!’”

Slightly confused, Harry asked, “I don’t think your descendants know it’s like this for you. Why don’t you tell them?”

The ghost laughed, a sardonic and bitter laugh. “I have told them! I started telling them forty years ago, and have said little else for the past twenty! Tell me, young man, what do you think their answer was?”

Harry thought, and after a few seconds, the answer came to him in a one-word flash. "Gaman."

"Gaman!" shouted the ghost. "Exactly! They think I have some unusual weakness, and I must just gaman! They are ashamed of me, and have stopped calling on me, because they know what I will say. I tell them that other ghosts say the same thing, and they do not believe me."

"Don't the other ghosts who feel like you do tell their descendants too?"

The ghost hung his head. "Sad to say, the chains of society still wrap around them in other ways. Most of them refuse to say anything to their descendants, because they know their descendants will be ashamed of them for their 'weakness.' I ask them, why should they care anymore? What do they have to lose? But for most, the rules of society regulate them after death, and they will not break them. They will mouth platitudes to their descendants, tell them everything is fine, and gaman. There are only a few like me who will speak the truth, and their fate is the same: to be ignored.

"Wait a moment... another wishes to use the shrine. I will, for a moment, make way for him." The ghost disappeared, and Harry wondered whether he would now see someone even more emotional and erratic.

"Bow down deeply before the honored ancestor, for we deserve to be treated as living gods, not that you little twerps could ever comprehend—"

"Oh, shut up, Fred," said a grinning Harry. "They can't understand you anyway. It's good to see you."

"You too, Harry. Have you heard any news from home lately?"

Harry shook his head. "Not exactly my priority; I wouldn't even read the Prophet if I could get it here. All the Weasleys okay?"

“Weasleys are all okay,” repeated Fred. “Since you’re here, I’ve been having some chats with the somewhat excitable fellow who summoned you here, and some of his friends.”

“How did you get hooked up with them?”

“Easy. They were the only Japanese ghosts who would talk to me! What nerve most of them have. Beneath their dignity to have a word with me, don’t you know. What a funny country you picked to visit.”

“Well, it wasn’t me so much as British Airways who picked it, but your point is well taken. What do you think of this whole Antiquity Link business?”

Fred shuddered. “Scary. I’d be doing exactly what he is, only louder. This would never last in England; ghosts would have rebelled as soon as it started. I already told you what it’s like. I stayed back by choice, but at least I have the comfort of knowing I can move on any time I want to. It’s ironic: the Japanese say the Antiquity Link is so ghosts can help the people they left behind. That’s what I’m doing, but it’s my bloody choice! Why don’t they let people decide?”

“Not the way this society works, I’m afraid,” said Harry. “The group comes first; tradition comes first.”

“Older people are supposed to come first!” exclaimed Fred. “That’s an even bigger irony! Some of these fellows have explained Japanese customs to me. Now I know I’m only getting one side of the story, but they’re supposed to respect the elderly. How can you respect something by imprisoning it?”

Harry shook his head. “No argument from me.”

Fred sighed. “Well, I suppose if you have a society that makes suffering seem like a noble thing, this gaman thing, combine that with obsessive respect for tradition and a disapproval of anyone who opens their mouth to complain, this might be what you’d get. A sad, sad situation. I hope these blokes can get something done. I really feel for them.”

“I do, too,” agreed Harry. “Is there anything you could do, like, round up some ghosts from different countries to persuade the Japanese ghosts to change their minds and say something?”

“It could be tried, but these seem like stubborn ghosts. How about you? You’re living in the home of a reasonably high-ranking Japanese official—“

Harry laughed. “Don’t even think about it. One thing I’ve learned about this country is that even if I were the Minister of Magic, I couldn’t change this system by myself. They revere it, they wouldn’t listen to anyone, certainly not me. The only way any change is going to happen is if it comes from the ghosts.”

“Yes, it is very strange,” agreed Fred. “All right, well, I’ll talk to these blokes a little more, see if there’s anything I can do. Not that it’s so much my business, but I feel bad, because I’m free and they’re not. Okay the gent who was here wants the floor back, so I’ll be off. Good to see you, Harry.”

“You, too,” said Harry.

The old ghost returned, apparently full of energy. “Now, that was something to see! Young man, what was your relationship with that ghost?”

Harry shrugged. “We’re friends.”

“You mean, you were friends.”

“No, we’re friends now. It doesn’t matter that he’s dead.”

“Do you not revere him?”

Harry laughed out loud. “I would say it as a joke, but no. We’re equals, that’s all.”

The ghost turned to the Japanese men. “We should learn from this. A living person talks to a ghost as if he were another person, exchanging news, making jokes! A ghost who voluntarily stayed

behind, to help others! This is all we ask for, the chance to make a choice. If I could be useful to my descendants, perhaps I would stay. But I am worth nothing more than fulfilling a role in a stale ceremony. This Fred should be held up as a model for all of Japanese society!"

Harry laughed again. "He'd love that."

The ghost eyed Harry expectantly. "So, young man, you will help us?"

Harry gave a start. "You heard me tell Fred, there's nothing I can do."

"Nothing with the living Japanese," the ghost clarified. "But there may be much you can do to help the young men here, to help us."

"Whoa, whoa," said Harry. "Look, I'm sorry, but I just can't get involved in this. I sympathize, I really do, but the family I'm staying with would get into really big trouble if I were to do anything like that. I'm afraid my moral support is the most you're going to get."

A strange sensation hit Harry: the knowledge that at least one of the men on the other side of the shrine was going to reach for his wand. He didn't know how he knew, but he knew. Trying to be subtle, he reached for his own.

They all produced their wands, but his was in his hand as well. One of them said, "You know too much—"

In a split second, Harry evaluated his options, and chose a course of action: he Disapparated. The next thing he saw was the section of Tokyo Station which led back to the wizarding world. Acting quickly before anyone might guess where he had gone and follow him, he walked through the portal.

As he walked to the Portkey station in the wizarding downtown area, he thought it over. I could have taken them, obviously, but the prudent thing to do was to get out of there. And unfortunately, I'd better not be visiting Kaz anymore. He didn't mean to, but he nearly got me into a load of trouble. I didn't know that he was so close to the guys who were doing that.

He again thought over whether there was anything he could do for the ghosts who considered themselves trapped, and again came up with nothing. Even if Sato were inclined to help—which he wouldn't—there would be nothing even he could do. And what if most Japanese ghosts didn't agree with that one? For Fred and me, it seems terrible, but what if most really don't mind? No, it's like I said back there. If the ghosts want to change something, it's on them to do it.

He reached the Portkey station, then hesitated, as he had one more decision to make before entering the Sato home: should he tell Sato what had happened? He knew that technically he should, but Sato might feel obliged to report to Aurors that ghosts were planning to do something to disrupt the Antiquity Link, and were being helped by ronin. Harry would be interrogated, asked to give Kaz's location, use him to round up the others... no, he thought, I'm not doing that. I'm not going to help them, but I'm not giving them up, either. It's not my society; I'm staying out of this. He grasped the Portkey.

* * * * *

Chapter 18, The Festival of the Departed: Harry and his host family attend the biggest festival of the year, but Harry finds that the hints of a rebellion by some of the ghosts are more substantial than he had thought.

From Chapter 18: Damn it, thought Harry. He turned to Sato, his tone very serious. "Listen to me. You've got to get the Aurors up there, you've got to let people know what's happening. And you've got to do it right now. This very minute! Do you understand?"

Chapter 18

The Festival of the Departed

“Did I ever tell you guys how much I hate the humidity?”

The next day, Harry and the three Y’s were outside on the practice field, twenty meters from any other group, practicing group spells. There had now been, Harry guessed, a month and a half straight of ninety-degree temperatures combined with high humidity. He had never experienced anywhere near that kind of humidity in England outside of a shower.

Yosuke seemed to be picking up the knack of deadpan humor. “No, Harry, you haven’t. Could you tell us?”

Harry knew, of course, that he had mentioned at least a few dozen times. “Well, if you insist, I could...”

Yusuke had long since learned how to tell when Harry was serious and when he wasn’t. “You have to gaman!” he encouraged Harry, feigning great seriousness.

Harry chuckled. “I’ll try. Maybe if I could not be bothered by the humidity, then I would also be able to do the group spells.”

“All part of being Japanese,” said Yosuke. “Hey, maybe that’s it! Maybe you have to be Japanese to do the group spells! It would explain a lot...”

“Yeah, it would, actually,” agreed Harry.

An idea suddenly came to him; in his head, he heard Kaz saying that he thought the participants had to be on the same wavelength. What if you don’t have to be Japanese, but...

They took a break, and Summoned bottles of water; fortunately, gaman didn’t extend to deliberately becoming dehydrated to prove one’s mettle. “So,” said Harry, “the whole country comes to the o-bon festival?” He had learned not to use ‘wizarding’ to clarify his

comments, as the Japanese wizards tended to speak as if the Muggle population didn't exist.

"Not every single person, but probably about 99%," suggested Yasunori. "Of able-bodied people, that is. It would be very strange not to come, since everyone does."

"If you don't come, do you have to apologize?" Harry deadpanned.

Yasunori answered as if it were a serious question, even though Harry was sure Yasunori knew he was joking. "No, but it would be... anti-social, I suppose I would say. People would ask whether you were all right; they'd just assume you were very sick."

"What if you said, 'I just thought I'd give it a miss this year?'"

"Then they'd know that you were a foreigner," said a grinning Yosuke.

"Seriously," said Yasunori, "they'd say you were being selfish."

"Selfish?" repeated Harry in surprise. "What's selfish about that?"

Yasunori looked at Harry tolerantly as Harry took a drink. "We've had this conversation before, Harry. About how your meaning of the word 'selfish' is different from ours."

"Oh, yeah," said Harry, remembering. "Ours is that you do something for yourself that hurts others, while yours is that you do something for yourself that is different from what most people do, even if it doesn't hurt anyone."

"And as my father explained to you, they're really the same because they both involve breaking social norms, and your social norms are just different from ours."

"Yeah, well... I get the point, but it still seems really different. I'm not sure I agree with him."

"You didn't argue with him," pointed out Yasunori.

Harry shrugged. "I didn't want to argue with a respected older person," he half-joked, using the translation his device gave him for a common Japanese phrase.

"Yeah, right," retorted Yasunori. "You argue with him pretty often. It's just when obaa-san says anything that you shut up."

"Well, I may be foreign, but I'm not stupid."

"And yet, you can't do the group spells," joked Yosuke. "Guaranteeing that our group will go down to ignominious defeat in the tournament."

Harry wasn't happy that he hadn't managed it, but was glad that they could joke about it, at least. He knew that they probably took it more seriously than they let on, and joked about it for his sake. "How will you ever live with the shame."

"What do you mean, 'we?' It'll be your shame, not ours," said Yosuke.

"I thought the shame of one was the shame of the group," said Harry.

Yosuke let slip a small grin. "Since you're foreign, we'll make an exception in your case."

Harry chuckled. "I appreciate that. But actually, I want to try something. When we resume, I want to try the test spell, the visual effect one."

They nodded their assent, and there was silence for a few minutes before they began practice again. Harry concentrated on trying to summon the same mental feeling as he imagine Japanese had. I am a member of the group, he thought. I have to be in harmony with the others...

He tried especially hard to be in this frame of mind when casting the spell, and after ten minutes of effort, he noticed that his spell's pattern, usually straight, was starting to take on a hint of the corkscrew pattern that he'd seen in almost all Japanese group spells. Encouraged, he tried harder. He imagined himself as Japanese, he respected the elders, he knew his place in society...

Suddenly one of his spells came tantalizingly close to their pattern; his corkscrew pattern was about a third longer and straighter than theirs. With a burst of intuition, he suddenly realized why it was a corkscrew and not straight: if one pattern was close enough to the others, it could be influenced by the others to 'fall in,' to adopt the same pattern. Just like Japanese society: you had to adapt and adjust yourself to be like the others; the corkscrew was to encourage it, and to give it time to happen. Fascinating, he thought. Just like the language, the magic also reflects the culture.

"Shouldn't we try something else for a while?" asked Yosuke.

"No!" exclaimed Harry, more strongly than he meant to. "Let's keep at this for a while."

The three Y's exchanged glances, and they wordlessly continued the practice; once again, as always, the three spells combined for a large effect, and Harry's produced a separate, slightly smaller effect. Harry found he had to take a few minutes to get back into the right frame of mind, but soon he was there again. He shot off a spell that wasn't as tight a corkscrew as theirs, but as if in slow motion, he saw it fall in with the others', and felt as if he'd thrown a Quidditch Quaffle through a hoop from midfield. He silently exulted as one very large burst of light exploded fifteen feet in front of them.

Stunned, the three stared at him. In his peripheral vision, he saw that some people from other groups had noticed, and were pointing. He looked back at them but said nothing, wondering if they understood his gratitude for their support and patience.

"This... will certainly help our chances in the tournament," said Yosuke.

Yasunori smiled and nodded. "Let's do this one a few more times, then go on to other spells." A similar burst of light was produced by the next spell. This school is going to be a lot more enjoyable from now on, he thought. He realized that for the past ten minutes, even though he was almost drenched in sweat, he hadn't noticed the heat or humidity.

* * * * *

It took Harry fifteen minutes to put on his Japanese formal wear. It seemed like a long time to take to get dressed, but then he remembered that Masako's grandmother had been helping her put on her kimono for almost two hours. He walked out into the living room to join Sato and Yasunori.

Yasunori looked impressed. "Nice."

"You look very good in that," agreed Sato. "There is often something a bit peculiar in seeing a Westerner in Japanese formal clothes, but you pull it off rather well."

"Thanks," said Harry. "Maybe it's because I have dark hair, but if someone with red or blond hair wore it, it would look more strange."

"Quite possible," said Sato. "By the way, congratulations on your victory today. Yasunori tells me that you will be in the finals tomorrow, and that your group will very likely win."

"Thanks. Yes, it does look that way. I was just happy that I was able to get the group spell going. It's always satisfying when you try to do a spell for a long time, then finally you get it. Probably this one more than any other, because the way it's done is so unique. It was like learning a whole new way of doing magic." Never could have learned it if I couldn't see spells, he added to himself.

"So, you believe the key to doing it is that you have to think like a Japanese?"

Harry thought for a minute. "I think that's the key to doing group spells as they're done in Japan, anyway. Theoretically, they could be done in other countries, in which case the way of doing them would be different. I think the key thing is that you have to be in sync with the other members of the group, and in Japan, you get in sync with that by feeling Japanese."

"It must have been a strange feeling for you," mused Sato.

"It is," agreed Harry. "But at least I understand it, even if I couldn't live my life like that. But a week or two after I got here, when I first started trying this spell, even if someone had told me exactly what to do, I couldn't have done it. Understanding Japanese culture, feelings, and attitudes is really the first step to doing this kind of spell."

"It may be," said Sato, "that similar types of spells are possible in other countries, but with different patterns or types of thinking."

"An interesting thought. It certainly sounds possible."

"So, Harry, I'm curious," said Yasunori. "Understanding the culture like you do, do you think you could be happy spending the rest of your life here, for example, getting married, having a family, like that?"

Sato looked at his son sternly. "Yasunori, we shouldn't be putting any pressure on him to do anything."

"I only meant, theoretically," protested Yasunori. "Would it be possible. I wasn't thinking it was really going to happen."

"It's an interesting question," said Harry. "It would be hard if only because I wasn't born here, don't have a family. But I get the point of your question: culturally, is it something I could get used to?"

He thought for a minute. "Honestly, and I don't mean any offense, but I'm not sure I could. I can pretty much be myself with the three Y's, and in this house, which is good. In dealing with other people socially, it would be difficult, like in a job, that kind of thing. But I think the hardest thing would be the idea that people aren't being straight with you, you wouldn't know what they were really thinking. Yes, I know, in England we aren't 100% straight with each other, but you know what I mean. I can see how you could get used to this if you were born into it. But to get used to something else, then this... there's a lot more freedom in England, and it's hard to voluntarily limit your freedom. I'd think it'd be much easier the other way around, for Japanese to get used to living in Western countries."

"Indeed it is," agreed Sato. "This is the problem, of course, with allowing Japanese wizards to live overseas. What happened to Harada is unfortunately not unheard of, though we try to prevent it. The key aspect is the presence of a good family life, I believe. We tell people who go over that if they find Western life appealing, the best way to deal with it is to in essence create another personality. The Western version of yourself, as it were. When you deal with foreigners, you have one persona. When dealing with Japanese, the one you were born with. But the one you were born with must be positive, strong, solid: it must be something you want to return to. In the case of Harada, because of his poor family life, he did not have enough incentive to return to it, and the 'foreign' personality took over, partly as a rebellion against his father. But yes, Harry-san, you are quite right. It is far easier to go from less freedom to more than the other way around."

"But what about the benefits of Japanese society, compared to Western?" asked Yasunori.

"A good point," said Sato. "But I believe that it all comes down to the family. If you don't have family, you don't have anything."

Harry couldn't help but nod his head at the truth of that. Seeing Harry's face, Sato immediately reacted with the understanding that he'd made a mistake. "I'm very sorry, I didn't mean what that sounded like."

"No, you were right. And I know. But I have an adopted family, at least. That's something."

There was an uncomfortable silence, so Harry spoke again. "But that makes me think of something. You said you worried about Kaz being your fault, but nobody knew his real situation. And maybe that guy at the Culture Ministry, Uchida-san, wanted to call him back, but he didn't know the real situation either. Couldn't it be the case that he was imagining it when he saw something that made him want to pull Kaz back? Maybe it was just by chance that he was right, and what he was doing at the time was just covering his ass."

Yasunori burst into laughter, which he tried to suppress with limited success. "You might want to avoid using that phrase, Harry-san," advised Sato evenly, with subtle disapproval. "Even in English, the phrase is somewhat on the rough side."

Harry was mildly embarrassed, even though he knew that using that phrase at a Weasley family dinner would elicit no more than a possible warning glance from Molly. "Sorry. I get into the habit of using phrases like that that are best for the situation, knowing that they probably won't be rough when they get translated."

"Usually, that is true," acknowledged Sato. "But in this case, it simply got rougher. It just so happens that the equivalent Japanese phrase could be literally translated into English as, 'protect one's crotch.'"

Now Harry laughed. "Ah, I see. I'll keep that in mind."

"At least the ladies were not present. But as to—"

Sato cut himself off as, as if on cue, Masako emerged from her bedroom, her grandmother four steps behind her. Masako's kimono was a light but vivid green, with a few large, stylized cranes as the main design, with cherry blossom branches in the background. Her hair was up, and makeup had been applied, subtly and tastefully; she almost looked like a different person than Harry had ever seen. "Wow," he exclaimed. With a slight smile, she bowed; he thought a bit of red had crept into her cheeks, but with the makeup, it was hard to tell.

Yasunori chuckled. "That's the Western way, just blurt it right out," he joked. "But yes, she does look very good."

"Quite beautiful," agreed Sato. "Obaa-san has done very well."

"I had good material," said Sato's mother proudly, "which makes it easier." Harry noticed that the grandmother herself was already wearing a kimono.

It was a quarter after five, and Harry realized that they would probably be leaving soon. "What about dinner?" he wondered.

“One always eats at the festival,” Sato explained. “There are plenty of vendors selling regional delicacies.”

“Couldn’t you get regional food in Tokyo anyway?” asked Harry. “It’s not as though transportation is a problem.”

“It is just a custom,” said Sato. “Even if a food could be sold profitably all over Japan, the area that makes it usually prefers to sell it there only, so it will be considered special, and so people will have a reason to visit. This festival is the only way to get, say, Hokkaido and Okinawa specialties without actually traveling there. Being more accustomed to the profit motive, Americans to whom I explained this thought it quaint and peculiar. But it is a custom I would dislike losing. If you visit a region, you always bring back local food as a souvenir.”

“Being rare, we feel, makes something special,” added Sato’s mother. “Like Masako-chan in a kimono.”

Harry was about to agree when Sato’s wife came in, also dressed in a kimono, holding a camera. “Well, we are almost ready. Everyone in front of the shrine.”

As the Satos moved toward the shrine, Harry guessed that formal pictures were usually taken there, so as to symbolically emphasize the presence of the ancestors. Noticing that Harry hadn’t moved, Yasunori said, “Harry, come on.”

Harry hadn’t wanted to assume he was welcome in a family picture. “Are you sure?”

“Of course,” added Sato. “You have been with us for almost three months now. Even if you were to leave tomorrow, we would still want you in the picture.”

“It’s very kind of you,” said Harry, using one of the Japanese phrases he was familiar with.

Two pictures were taken, both with the women in front, and the men behind them, youngest on the left to oldest on the right. Sato

operated the camera from a distance magically, so no photographer was necessary. It felt odd for him to be in a family picture; he then realized he never had before. The Dursleys had always excluded him from such pictures, and the Weasleys had never taken one with him around. I should ask them to do that sometime, he thought.

He suddenly remembered, from the 'other reality,' a family picture of him with his parents and Sirius. I would love to have that picture, he thought. The thought of his parents from that reality made him feel melancholy, not acutely sad as it had when he arrived in Japan. That, he supposed, was something.

* * * * *

Letting go of the temporary two-way Portkey, Harry looked out over a scene that dwarfed even the Quidditch World Cup, previously the largest gathering of wizards he'd even witnessed. The area's geography consisted of gently sloping low hills leading on almost all sides to a large, roughly circular valley, which had to be a half a mile in diameter. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of people were already there, in the valley. The Portkey station was a kilometer away from the valley, necessitating an easy, ten-minute walk down the hill to get to the festival.

"Beautiful, isn't it," breathed Sawako.

"It certainly is," agreed her husband. To Harry, he added, "One year, we just stood here for half an hour, watching, before we headed down. It is considered one of the artistic touches of this place that the Portkey stations are all situated in the foothills, so one can appreciate the scene from a distance before entering. Having a Portkey station in the middle of the festival grounds would be more efficient, but would take away the beauty of this view."

Harry nodded. "I can really appreciate that. Amazing, it looks like a city down there, and not a small one. Is this place really empty the rest of the year?"

"Yes, it is," said Sato. "We keep it for this."

“That string of lights, that pattern, whatever you call it, that goes from one end to the other... it kind of looks like the shape of Japan. Is that deliberate?”

Sawako answered. “Yes. The stands, selling food, general goods, and souvenirs, are situated according to their area of origin in Japan. The ones at that end are from Okinawa and Kyushu, and at the other end, from Tohoku and Hokkaido. So if you want food or goods from a particular area of Japan, it is easy to know where to go. Just follow the map.”

“Very clever,” said Harry, still taking it all in. “So, where are the ghosts?”

“They will not appear for another hour or so,” said Sato. “They usually make a rather dramatic entrance. By the way, just so you know... the behavior of some people may be a bit less... restrained than usual. Drinking is common at this festival; it is the only place and time, in fact, when public drinking is allowed in Japan. So, you may see behavior that you don’t usually see in Japan.” Harry saw a distinctly unhappy look on Maeko’s face.

Interesting, he thought. “Like what?”

“Public singing,” answered Sawako. “People telling long, rambling stories of which one can tell at least half is fiction. Once, I saw a man kiss his wife!”

Harry paused, sure there was more to the story. “And...?”

She stared at him in surprise. “Is there public kissing in your country?”

“Sure. I mean, not tons of it, but it happens. What’s wrong with that?” Sawako’s expression answered for her. “Well, I mean, was this some kind of major production, or...”

Smiling, Sato explained, “By Western standards, it was a chaste kiss—“

Sawako interrupted him. "I don't think I want to know what they do in Western countries, in that case."

"But here," continued Sato, "such a thing is considered highly provocative. Culturally, it is not unlike... well, to be honest, I realize that my mother will chastise me if I say too clearly what it is not unlike. Let us just say that it is not unlike activity that if done in your country publicly, would get one arrested."

"I get the picture," said Harry, amused at Sato's reluctance. He was tempted to tell them about all the kissing that went on at Hogwarts, but decided it was too likely to shock them, especially the women. Maybe he would tell the three Y's at school the next day.

After a few more minutes of watching, they headed down, the Satos talking about past festivals. Harry asked why the festival didn't last for two or three days, considering all the trouble that was obviously gone to in order to set this one up. Sato said it had been considered, but it had been only one day for over a thousand years, so people were reluctant to change that. He did point out that it started at noon and ended at six in the morning, so it lasted almost a whole day. The Satos never stayed later than ten because, Sato explained, "The later one stays, the more drunk more people are, and it was never something we wanted our children to see."

"I think we're old enough now, Father," said Yasunori humorously.

"You'll be old enough when you're an adult," said Sato, "at which time you can stay until six if you want to. You'll probably do it only once."

"Does that mean you did, Father?"

"Oh, look, that stand over there is selling fresh crab! It's very time-consuming, you know, to transport them here while they're still alive. No doubt it'll be very expensive." Harry and Yasunori exchanged a grin at Sato's transparent attempt to avoid answering his son's question.

They waded into the crowd, which was not quite as thick as it had been in Muggle Tokyo on early Sunday evening, if only because the

area was so much larger. Harry saw more kimonos than he thought he would ever see, all of them so tight that the women could only take relatively short strides, and suddenly wondered about something. He leaned over to Yasunori and whispered, "How do they go to the bathroom in those kimonos?"

Yasunori grinned. "To be honest, I'm not sure. It's not the kind of question I'm allowed to ask. But I'd have to imagine, very carefully." Nodding, Harry thought, maybe I wouldn't really want to know the details anyway.

As they walked along a 'street,' or what seemed like one—there were stands on both sides, and many people walked in between—there was a table set up, and four men were sitting there, drinking beer and eating what appeared to be salted fish on sticks. "Look at that!" exclaimed Maeko, keeping her voice low enough so the men couldn't overhear her. "It's only five-thirty, and they're already drinking! They should at least wait until six, out of common decency."

With the barest smile, Sato responded, "Obaa-san, I seem to recall a few years ago that some people were drinking at six, and you said that they should wait until seven."

Maeko considered this. "You're right. They should wait until seven, not six."

Harry assumed that if they had started at seven, she would say they should have started at eight, and wondered if that had been her son's point. Why does she care when people start drinking, he wondered, Guess older people are just more conservative. Except the ones who are drinking, I suppose.

The stand near them was selling various kinds of food on sticks; Japanese letters on the stand spelled out the word 'otsumami.' He had learned about many kinds of Japanese food, but not this one. He pointed and asked Yasunori, "What does that word mean?"

"Otsumami?" responded Yasunori; surprisingly, his device gave no translation. Harry pointed to his translator and shook his head.

Sato explained. "There is not an English word for it. It more or less refers to salty food that is to be eaten while one drinks alcohol. Often meat, but it can be non-meat food such as nuts. No one word translates it properly."

"That's a good word," said Harry, impressed. "We should have a word for that."

"Better to just not drink," advised Maeko.

"I guess you're not a big fan of drinking, obaa-san," commented Harry.

"You're an observant young man," she replied; with how much humor, he wasn't sure. "It just hurts your body, for no real benefit. You didn't drink when you were in England, did you?"

Harry shook his head. "Too busy fighting Dark wizards. No opportunity."

"Well, you're a brave young man. Take my advice, don't start this habit. You're an important person in your country. Young people will look up to you, and you have to be an example for them. You can be a better example by not teaching them bad habits."

Harry nodded in understanding, saying nothing; he was a little surprised by the force of her words, as she was usually more relaxed when giving opinions at the Satos' dinner table. Of course, Harry realized, the topic of alcohol had never come up at the table, as none of the Satos drank.

Yasunori took Harry aside, ostensibly to show him something at a stall. "Obaa-san's husband, my father's father, died three years ago of an alcohol-related disease," explained Yasunori. "She had always complained that he drank too much, but he wouldn't stop. Now, all you have to do is mention alcohol, and she says that kind of thing."

"Did your father ever drink?"

"Occasionally, he used to, because his father did, and his father liked to drink with him. He told me about it once. It was difficult for him,

because his parents had such opposite wishes. After his father died, obaa-san asked him to promise he would never drink again, and asked me to promise that I would never start. Well, obviously, we had no choice but to say yes. A few days later, he took me aside and talked to me about it. He said that while she is alive, accepting her request is a way of showing our respect for her, and the difficulties she had with the topic. But after she is no longer with us, then we should make our own choices. He did say that his father's case showed that there are real dangers of drinking, and even after she passed on, he didn't plan to do it except for very rare occasions."

Harry nodded. It seemed to him that not drinking just because a parent requested it was a lot, but he could understand it in this case. "Is drinking uncommon here? I mean, it's huge in the Japanese Muggle world. There's tons of pubs, lots of liquor stores, and even machines that sell beer."

"No, it's very common. I think our house is unusual. Yusuke's father drinks, and not only do both of Yosuke's parents, but they even let him drink! Don't repeat that, of course. His father thinks it's important to be a 'strong drinker,' because men often drink after hours to promote strong social bonds."

Harry was going to respond, but Sawako called them over, cutting short their conversation. As they hurried to catch up, they passed a group of eight young women, perhaps in their early twenties, all wearing kimonos. Harry had yet to see a woman who wasn't, except for a few of the women who were working at the stands. As he passed them, he saw that most were staring at him. He was well used to it—the only time he wasn't stared at in public was in the Muggle world, where there were many more Westerners—but sometimes couldn't resist pointing it out. He stopped, looked at them, and said 'Good evening' with a short bow. Most of the women giggled; half said 'good evening' in return.

He smiled and rejoined Yasunori, who chided him. "You really shouldn't do that."

"Why not?"

Yasunori rolled his eyes. "You know why not. We don't talk to strangers."

"But it's okay to stare at strangers?"

"It's... understandable."

"Well, I have a lifetime of experience of being stared at, and it may be understandable, but it's still bad behavior. I have no problem at all reminding people that they're doing it."

Yasunori raised his eyebrows a little, but had no comment as they rejoined the family. "Why aren't they with their families, anyway?" asked Harry.

Sawako answered. "It is common for families to break up for predetermined periods of time so individuals can spend time with friends. Those girls are probably school friends who wanted to spend an hour or two together."

For the next hour, they wandered around in no particular pattern, then headed for the southern part of the 'map,' as Sato's father's hometown was there. As they walked, Harry started to see no small number of shrines, almost always with ghosts hovering over them, with a small audience of wizards around each one. "What's that?" asked Harry.

"It is an o-bon custom called 'mukashi-banashi,' or literally, 'telling of old stories,'" explained Sato. "An honored ancestor holds court at a shrine that their descendant brings to the festival, and is listened to not by his descendants, but by strangers. It is a way to circulate stories. Some are stories the ancestor was told by his or her ancestor; some are things that happened in his or her life that the ancestor thinks is good for everyone to know."

Maeko eyed Harry. "Can you guess what mine is going to be about?"

Harry grinned. "Why drinking is a really bad idea?"

She nodded. "Clever young man. I have quite a few stories, mostly involving my late husband."

"I'm wondering, does your late husband now regret that he drank?"

"No, he does not," she responded with annoyance. "Stubborn man. He says, 'it is better to have lived enjoyably and more briefly than longer but without enjoyment.' But I say that if you need alcohol to live enjoyably, then there was something wrong with your life in the first place."

Harry could see both sides, but knew one thing for sure: he would never mention alcohol in obaa-san's presence again.

As eight o'clock approached, the Satos decided to head a short distance into the foothills to enjoy the centerpiece of the festival, the performance art by the spirits of the ancestors. Sato explained that many people watched it from the festival, and there was nothing wrong with that, but it gave a somewhat better view to watch it from a greater distance, because the images were so large.

Sato conjured chairs for everyone; Harry knew he could conjure his own, but let Sato do it to be polite. The first thing they saw was thousands of ghosts floating about three meters off the ground, mostly over the festival area, but to some extent over the surrounding foothills as well. More and more ghosts seemed to join as the minutes went by; the layer of ghosts got thicker and thicker.

Suddenly, the ghosts started to move in a way that made it look from above not as if they were a flat circle, but an orange that had been peeled from the top down, with eight strips. Then the strips shot upward, and Harry was looking at a hundred-meter-tall, brilliant globe.

"Wow," said Harry admiringly.

"Oh, it gets better than this," commented Yasunori, sitting next to him.

After a few seconds, the ball shrank in size to a diameter of ten meters; Harry wondered if it was now a solid—so to speak—mass of ghosts. For the next minute, the ball expanded in, then out, in, and

out. Finally, it expanded ever outward, so the ball became as wide as the festival area before getting so thin it almost couldn't be seen. The ghosts then zoomed back to the center and formed a square, then repeated the expanding-contracting cycle. Next it was a flower, then a tree—though the tree didn't expand and contract, but grew and then shriveled, as if to indicate the life cycle of a tree—and finally a bamboo plant. Harry was amazed at the versatility shown, that every spirit seemed to know what to do. He recalled having been told that they practiced a lot, but still, it was very impressive.

What came next was even more surprising. Three groups of three balls of light formed; one group was in front of the Satos, and the other two were facing different directions, so everyone watching could get a good look at at least one group. The balls formed into what appeared to be lanterns, with Chinese characters formed in black—the absence of ghosts to fill the space; ghosts filled all the space except what was necessary to spell out those characters.

“Great,” enthused Sawako. “They’ve done characters before, but never like this. This is more artistic.”

“Can someone tell me...” said Harry. He could read the alphabet letters, but not the Chinese characters.

“The first one, on the left, is sonkei,” said Yasunori, as Harry’s device translated it as ‘respect.’ “The second is ‘ganbaru.’ Do your best. “The last one is—one of your favorite words, Harry—“

“Gaman?” he guessed.

“Very good! You can read it!” Harry and Yasunori exchanged a laugh.

The words held their form for more than a minute, then the ghosts started forming a circle and whirling around, spinning fast in a circle with a half-mile diameter. “Oh, the big one is coming,” said Sawako.

The large circle went from almost flat to wide and cylindrical, rising and getting thinner as it did. Suddenly, all the spirits dashed to their assigned spot, and in the space of a few seconds, an image had formed of a man’s head. It was remarkable; features were clear, even

the eyes. The crowd let out a loud cheer, which Sato, his wife, and his mother joined in.

“A face! They’ve never done that before! Unbelievable!” gushed Sawako.

“Very well done,” agreed Maeko.

“Who is that?” asked Harry.

Yasunori leaned over. “His name is Toshihiko Fukui, and he’s one of the most famous Japanese wizards of all time, maybe the most famous. He created a lot of new magic, but he’s most famous for inventing the spell that makes possible the Antiquity Link. He lived about a thousand years ago.”

“Very appropriate that they chose him, for the first time they tried a person’s face,” agreed Sato. “Harry, for your reference, Merlin is probably the only comparable historical figure.”

Harry nodded his understanding. It was, indeed, very impressive. The face hung there, motionless. “How long will it stay?” asked Harry.

“At least ten minutes,” answered Yasunori.

“Fifteen, I think,” put in his mother. “I’m fairly sure they stay on the one that’s the highlight for fifteen minutes, so everyone has a chance to get a good look.”

Taking a long look at the figure, Harry again wondered how the ghosts were able to coordinate their activities well enough to form such a good portrait. As he watched, he saw an extra line of light, like an outline, start at the top of the head, eventually encircling the entire head. “What’s that?” asked Harry.

“What’s what?” responded Yasunori.

“What’s that thing around the head?”

“What thing?”

“That outline, the extra light, that just surrounded the head.”

Yasunori looked closer. “I can’t see anything. Father, can you?”

Sato peered at it closely. “No, I can’t.”

A spell, thought Harry. With great disquiet, he suddenly remembered the events of Sunday evening. Was something happening that wasn’t supposed to happen? Or was this a reinforcing spell, standard, that no one could see because they couldn’t see spells?

There was a lot of ambient noise, but Harry suddenly picked up something very faintly that sounded like his name, as though someone was shouting it from a great distance. Focusing intently with his improved hearing and eyesight, he listened again, and heard it coming from a few hundred meters away. He could barely see a ghost, floating ten meters above the crowd in the foothills.

What the hell? If it’s a ghost calling for me, there’s only one person it could be. Well, if this is wrong, people are going to be annoyed with me, but so be it. He took out the Elder Wand, and focused on the third-year Quidditch win. “Expecto Patronum!”

The stag burst out of his wand and galloped away through the air, in the direction of the ghost. The Satos stared at him in shock, even Yasunori, who had seen the spell before. “Harry, what are you doing?” he asked disapprovingly.

Harry knew that almost everyone around them was looking either at him or the Patronus, but he didn’t care. “Someone’s calling me.”

“Look!” said Sawako. “There’s a new pattern forming at the top of the head! They usually don’t change once they’re settled.” Harry looked and saw the same thing: the top of the head was becoming substantially brighter, as if the spirits there had developed greater intensity. The effect was slowly spreading down; Harry guessed it would take five or ten minutes to work its way down.

Harry's Patronus was now coming back towards him, as a ghost zoomed over, and in seconds, had stopped right in front of him. "Fred! What's going on?"

"Harry! Thank Merlin you heard me. Been looking for you, like a needle in a bloody haystack. Mr. Sato, you understand English, right?"

Dumbfounded, Sato mutely nodded. The other Satos were equally baffled by the turn of events, and Harry knew they couldn't understand Fred.

"Listen, Mr. Sato," said Fred, speaking fast. "I only have time to tell you this once, and you need to believe me, or else you're going to lose the Antiquity Link. I've been under cover with some of your ghosts who don't like the Link so much; they're working with some ronin, older ones who've basically become Dark Wizards, maybe a dozen. The ronin told the rebel ghosts that they came up with a way to destroy the Link, and needed their help. Those ghosts are sick of the Link, and agreed to help them. Maybe a hundred ghosts.

"But what most of the ghosts didn't know is that what's happening, which is happening right now, will not just destroy the Link. A field just went up, surrounding the ghosts, holding them in place. The real plan is to turn all the ghosts into evil poltergeists, able to affect things in the physical world. Think Peeves, Harry, only evil. About eighty thousand of them. Think of what could be done."

Oh my God, thought Harry. He pointed. "Is that what's happening right now, at the top of the head?"

"Yes, that must be it," agreed Fred. "Those are now poltergeists, and it's spreading. All they needed was one ghost who was willing to become a poltergeist, as the catalyst. The spell infects others, through him. Their spirits will be trapped inside an evil host, and the ronin will control them. If something isn't done in the next few minutes, Mr. Sato, they're finished!"

Harry saw someone fly through the night air towards the bottom of the portrait. "Fred, who's that? Is that one of the bad guys?"

“Don’t know, I’ll check. Be back in a few seconds.” He zoomed away.

Yasunori and Sawako started asking Harry and Sato questions, but Harry ignored them. He pointed his wand at his fingernail, whose ever-present light he had gotten so used to he had stopped noticing it, and started increasing the size of the package within it. When it had reached the size of the fingernail itself, he moved it to his hand, and enlarged it the rest of the way. Just in case, he thought. He unwrapped it and put the white wrapper in the bag,

Suddenly, Fred was back. “That’s your friend from the Muggle world. He knows what’s going on, but he just now found out about the evil poltergeist part of the deal, and he’s trying to stop it.” Harry saw the lone figure take up position at the bottom of the face; he saw a small bubble of magic interrupt the encircling spell. “I told him he couldn’t, Harry, that’s a powerful spell. He’s not going to have enough energy to get out of there alive after a couple of minutes, and I told him that, but he just said, ‘then I’m going to die trying.’ The poltergeists expand more slowly while someone’s interrupting the encircling spell, but like I said, it can’t last.”

Damn it, thought Harry. He turned to Sato, his tone very serious. “Listen to me. You’ve got to get the Aurors up there, you’ve got to let people know what’s happening. And you’ve got to do it right now. This very minute! Do you understand?”

Sato was aghast. “But how do we know this is true?”

Barely controlling anger, Harry said, “Sato-san, Fred died fighting evil in our country. If he says it, you’d better believe it’s true. Now, you have to do something!” Opening his bag, he spoke to it. “Firebolt!”

“One more thing,” added Fred as Harry pulled out his broom and threw the bag over his shoulder. “The only way to save the Antiquity Link and reverse the ones who’ve already been turned is to reinforce the link through the shrines. Every Japanese shrine needs its owner to be there, doing that spell that reaches the Link. Anyone who doesn’t do that risks their ancestors staying as poltergeists. Now, you’d better get moving!” Fred zoomed away.

Harry mounted his broom. "Harry, what are you doing?" cried Yasunori.

"Trying to slow this thing down, and I hope, get Kaz out of there." He glanced behind him. "Sato-san, you know what you have to do. You can see what's happening right there. Your ancestors are depending on you." He kicked off his broom, and shot up into the night sky. He didn't want to think about what would happen if Sato did nothing.

As he approached Kaz's position, he saw that about one-third of the spirits were now poltergeists; strangely, except for the greater intensity, the portrait looked the same. He wondered if the ghosts just couldn't move.

He pulled up next to an obviously weak Kaz. "Kaz! Get out of here!"

"Can't!" Kaz gasped. "Not... enough... strong..."

Harry put up his spell, similar to the one he'd used when announcing his presence at the beginning of the Voldemort duel to distract Voldemort's attention from killing Molly. Not that the shield would have stopped the Killing Curse, he knew, but there, it had been more for effect. Here, it was for a definite purpose. He made it circular, with both himself and Kaz in the circle. Immediately he felt great pressure around him and the shield, and wondered how Kaz had held his shield as long as he had. He must have been just about to lose it, Harry knew, and would have died. Harry hoped to avoid the same fate, but knew he had to hold on as long as he could. The rate of expansion of the poltergeists was increasing even now, he could see; clearly, the more there were, the faster they could turn others. Harry knew that if he hadn't gone up, the process would have been irreversible. But he also knew that he was only buying time. He looked down at Kaz, exhausted and barely conscious, lying across Harry's lap as he sat on his broom.

Harry focused all his energy on keeping the spell going, but it took a lot of consistent energy, like holding a heavy weight in place for an extended time. The muscles would just give out at some point, and he noticed that maintaining the spell was getting more and more

difficult. Is it really getting harder, he thought, or is it just that I'm getting weaker from doing this so long? Hard to say.

Here's what's weird... the biggest danger I'm in is from the damn Japanese seniority system. It's all a matter of who Sato knows, or who the guy who Sato knows knows, and whether he can get someone to do something in time. Maybe that would be the case in England as well, but he's going to have to do something he's really uncomfortable doing just to get someone to listen to him. If he could get to Aurors... or will even the Aurors hesitate, waiting for permission from above? God, I hope not. He felt the strain of the spell weaken him further. Have to gaman, he thought with dark humor.

He felt the last reserves of his strength going, and knew he couldn't last more than another half minute at most. Okay, I gave it my best shot, but now I have to get out of here. Shield still in place, he tried to fly out, but his broom didn't move. He felt mild panic as he realized he was trapped; the pressure of the field around him not allowing him to move. He called upon desperation reserves of energy as he cast about for a way to—

"Life cube!" he shouted at his bag, then reached in and took it. It would be a shame to ruin it, he thought, but I could die here, so now isn't the time to be thinking about the future. With luck, I can always find a new one. He sucked the life out of it until it was black, then threw it back into the bag. He suddenly felt much better. Wondering if with new strength he could get away, but again, he couldn't move. He thought about Disapparating, but realized he would have to drop the shield first, and doing that would almost certainly kill him. No, it's all down to the Japanese now.

He started thinking about Ron and Hermione, who he might never see again. They would be devastated, and Hermione would no doubt use the phrase 'saving-people-thing' more than once in the days ahead. What's wrong with saving people anyway? Of course, here, I'm not exactly saving people, except for the people who the poltergeists would hurt or kill... probably a whole lot of Japanese wizards... what an irony that would be, killed by the trapped spirits of their revered ancestors...

A few more minutes passed as he occupied himself with such thoughts, as he used all his strength to keep the shield up. Looking up, he could see that now more than two-thirds of the face was poltergeists, and they were now moving about to such an extent that the top half of the face was unrecognizable. Harry could see them, darting about... he was getting weaker...

Focusing so hard on what he was doing, he found he was surprised when he felt the pressure lessen, as twelve men in silver-lined black robes took up positions in a circle around him, creating three shields with group spells. An Auror plucked Kaz's limp form from his lap, and another draped Harry over his shoulder as he flew away. Suddenly Harry heard a very loud announcement: "Attention, all citizens. There is a crisis requiring immediate action. All adult citizens must go to their shrine as quickly as possible. This is urgent. Leave your children here; they will be cared for. Our ancestors are in danger. Once at your shrine, you must..." Harry heard no more as he drifted into unconsciousness.

* * * * *

"Father! He's awake!"

Lying on his futon in his bedroom as he came to consciousness, Harry saw Yasunori standing at the door to his bedroom, shouting outside. In a few seconds, Sato came in with his son. From the sunlight coming through the window, Harry guessed it was about nine in the morning. Wow, I must have slept for quite a long time.

Still slightly weak, Harry sat up and to his surprise saw both Satos sit on the floor next to his futon in the seiza position and bow deeply towards him, their foreheads nearly touching the floor. Embarrassed, Harry mumbled, "Um, you really don't have to do that."

Assuming a more normal sitting position again, Sato nodded. "It is what we do, Harry-san, when we want to express thanks in a way that words cannot convey," he said gravely. "You saved the Antiquity Link, you saved our ancestors from a horrible fate, and you saved many lives at the festival. So many poltergeists, on the loose with so

many people, could easily have become a bloodbath. You prevented all that. As I said, thanks are nowhere near enough.”

“If Fred were here, he would say, ‘money is good.’”

Sato grinned. “Yes, I had a short talk with him after last night’s events, when he kindly described his version of the events to the Aurors. I translated his words for them, taking care to omit a few of his more... irreverent comments. Character-wise, he seems to be back to his usual self.”

“We wouldn’t have him any other way. Which reminds me, it wasn’t only me. Kaz and Fred, too. Without them, it would have happened.”

“And, of course, we owe them great thanks,” agreed Sato. “But what you did was the most impressive, partly because unlike Fred-san, you risked your life, and unlike Harada-san, you did not have past sins to atone for, as it were. You... a colorful idiom I picked up in America is, you had no dog in this fight. You do not even have strong feelings about the Antiquity Link itself, as you expressed to the ronin last Sunday night. But you did what you did anyway. You... please excuse me, perhaps I should not say this, but... you will be a great Auror Leader.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. “Did Fred tell you about that?”

Sato explained the mark on Harry’s forehead, showing him with a mirror and a Reveal spell. “You will be great because you naturally do the right thing, the thing that saves lives. You do what needs to be done, with honor, and I would be pleased to be a citizen of a country that had you as Auror Leader.”

Harry was touched by Sato’s words. “Thank you, I really appreciate that. But I’m far from sure that I want to be Auror Leader.”

“I know, which is why I apologized for saying so. But I strongly feel that it is true.”

Something else Sato had said suddenly registered. “How do you know about what happened Sunday night?”

“The Aurors... I apologize for their actions, as I know you will consider it an invasion of privacy, but they debriefed you while you were asleep. There is a method that allows them to contact your unconscious as you sleep, and cause you to respond to questions, which you cannot help but do truthfully. In view of your actions, I strongly urged them to wait until you were awake, but they insisted that time was a factor, and it had to be done as soon as possible; this was last night, two hours after the events. My presence was necessary, as your translating device does not work while you are asleep; I had to translate for them. Again, I apologize.”

Harry sighed. “I’m not thrilled, but I suppose I can understand why they felt it was so necessary. Did I say anything interesting?”

Sato’s lips formed a small grin. “As a matter of fact... after you explained what Fred-san had said about what would happen if nothing was done, the senior Auror’s next question was, ‘why did you do what you did?’ He meant, why did you take it upon yourself when you had nothing at stake, but he did not frame his question precisely, and I translated it exactly as he said it. Your exact response was, ‘you moron, didn’t you hear what I just said?’” Harry and Yasunori started to laugh. “It was all I could do not to laugh, or smile. I apologized to the Auror for your rudeness, and assured him that you were quite polite when you were awake.”

“Yusuke and Yosuke will love that,” chuckled Harry. “Hey, that reminds me, the tournament! We need to get to school!”

Father and son exchanged an uneasy look. “Yasunori stayed home today; he wanted to make sure you were all right. But there is another matter connected to that, for which I must again apologize in advance... you cannot go to the school because the Ministry of Justice—and I stress that this is a technicality, purely for the sake of pursuing proper form—has requested that you not be allowed to leave this house until further notice. In a sense, you are considered to be under house arrest.”

Harry was astonished, and was sure his face showed it. "Well, it's a good thing I didn't save the whole world instead of just Japan, because I'd be in real trouble then."

Yasunori nodded. "I'd be angrier than that, if it was me."

"Their reason is that you broke Japanese law; it is against the law to fly at the festival without prior approval."

Harry stared, waiting for more. When it didn't come, his mouth fell open. "You've got to be kidding! They're holding me for that??"

Sato nodded regretfully. "I am ashamed of the fact, but yes. Again, I emphasize that this is for form's sake; I would be shocked if charges against you were contemplated. It is just that while the British Minister can pardon one with the wave of his hand, here it is more complicated. Discussions must be held, consensus reached, and so forth.

"You see, Harry-san, on the surface, you are being held for the flying violation. In reality, they consider your more serious offense to be meeting with ronin, and being told of a plan to damage the Antiquity Link but not reporting it. The problem is, those things are not, strictly speaking, illegal. The flying violation gives them an excuse to consider the totality of your conduct when making their determination."

"I hope, Father, that the 'totality' of his conduct will include saving our ancestors, weighed against whatever minor things he didn't do exactly right." Harry had never heard Yasunori talk to his father quite so aggressively.

"Of course it will, Yasu-kun," Sato said gently.

"I am sorry, Sato-san, for not telling you about the ronin thing," said Harry sincerely. "Maybe I should have. It's just that—"

Sato waved him off. "You need not explain yourself, especially as you already have, when you were unconscious. It made sense, and I know that your heart was in the right place. Frankly, had you told me,

I probably would have done nothing, thinking it was not a serious matter. I would probably have considered it the delusions of grandeur of ronin, and the ramblings of a demented spirit. The Aurors have already chided me for allowing you to meet with ronin; I hate to think what they would say had you reported what you heard and I had done nothing.”

Harry frowned. “But you didn’t know that I was meeting with him!”

“Harry-san, please. Of course I knew. Strictly speaking, according to Japanese tradition, I should not have allowed it. But I did not want you to feel like a prisoner by not allowing you to go to the Muggle world, and I felt you should be allowed to make up your own mind about Harada-san, or about ronin in general. I was not at all surprised you felt his punishment to be too harsh. I knew that he was a good young person, which is why his fate pained me so deeply.”

“What will happen to him?”

Sato shrugged. “That is a very good question; I cannot begin to guess what they will do. You will no doubt say he should be allowed back into Japanese society. I cannot disagree, but such a thing would be literally unprecedented, and you know how much we Japanese love precedent. On the other hand, simply casting him out again would seem horribly ungrateful.”

“If they don’t accept him back, they could just send him to America,” suggested Harry. “I think he’d be happier there.”

“Not a bad idea,” said Sato. “I will mention it.”

Harry yawned and stretched. “So, what does one do under house arrest?”

Sato smiled. “Breakfast would seem like a good start, and my wife is making a special one, in your honor.”

“What is it?” asked Harry, surprised.

“My Canadian counterpart recently gave me a gift of Canadian maple syrup. He included with it a recipe for pancakes.”

Harry grinned. “Sounds very good.”

* * * * *

Two days later, Harry walked down the halls of the Ministry with Sato at his side. During the five-minute walk, he was stopped three times by Ministry workers who wanted to thank him for his efforts.

They walked into the large office at the end of the corridor, which also contained a conference table, at which five men were already sitting. As they sat, Harry at the far end and Sato nearest to him, Sato quickly informed him that they were the ministers of Culture, Interior, Justice, Foreign Affairs, and the Minister of Magic.

“Potter-san,” said the Minister officiously, his face expressionless. “A decision has been reached in your case. In view of your assistance to the people of Japan, you will not be prosecuted for your violation of Japanese law. You will, however, be asked to leave Japan within 48 hours.”

Harry and Sato exchanged surprised glances, and Harry said the first thing that came to his mind, knowing it wasn't very politic but not caring. “Minister, you really don't have to do that. Your thanks is all the reward I need.”

Harry saw from Sato's slight wince that he wasn't pleased. The Minister looked around, confused. “I... do not understand. Sato-san, is there a cultural nuance that I am missing?”

Harry now felt bad that Sato had to explain it, but to his surprise, Sato did it forthrightly, without apology on Harry's behalf or apparent embarrassment. “Yes, Minister. Potter-san's comment is sarcastic, suggesting that this action is far too punitive in view of his accomplishment, and so lacks any sense of gratitude.”

Harry nodded. “I also meant to get across the concept of ‘would you rather I had done nothing,’ but Sato-san is correct. If your idea of

gratitude is not sending me to prison, then I don't understand Japanese culture as well as I thought I did."

"None of which is my concern," responded the Minister, obviously irritated. "Discussion has been taken, and a decision arrived at. Sato-san, you will please prepare him for his departure." The Minister stood, causing all others at the table to do so except Harry.

The Minister headed for the door, and in so doing, passed within a few feet of Harry. "Minister," said Harry firmly as he stood. "Seriously, I would really like to know. Would you rather I hadn't done it?" The Minister stood still for a second, then silently continued walking, and left the room, followed by the Interior minister. The Foreign Minister, who Harry recognized as the one who had been annoyed with him upon his arrival, stood and headed out as well, but stopped in front of Harry and delivered a formal, 45-degree bow, which Harry knew was in Japan a highly respectful one. Harry delivered the same bow in return; the Foreign Minister nodded, and left.

The Justice Minister spoke first. "Potter-san, I am truly sorry for the Minister's action. While we do not wish to condone any sort of lawbreaking, the circumstances more than justify a complete pardon, in my opinion. Those I have spoken to in my department expressed their admiration for your actions, some requesting that I convey that to you. I do so now, adding my own as well."

"Thank you, Minister," replied Harry politely. The man nodded, got up, and left the room.

It was now just Harry, Sato, and the Culture Minister, who had all been seated at the far end of the table. "Potter-san, please allow me to introduce myself; my name is Takeshi Hayashi. When you arrived here, I was opposed to allowing you to stay here, and caused you a few small problems on your first day. I would like to admit that I was wrong, and apologize for my actions then."

Harry nodded, understanding that an apology was a symbol of respect, especially coming from a high government official. "Thank you, Hayashi-san, I appreciate that. As I told Sato-san at the time, I didn't take offense, and could easily see the same thing happening in

England. But I wonder if I could ask you a question. Do you have any idea why the Minister takes the attitude he does? I mean, not that I need some kind of reward or official gratitude, but his manner and decision seem very... peculiar."

The Culture Minister nodded thoughtfully. "Your actions merit an answer to your question, even though very few Japanese in your position would ask, especially so directly. Needless to say, what I am about to say must not leave this room." Harry and Sato both nodded their acknowledgement.

"There have been many discussions among those of us of Ministerial rank in the past few days. The early ones concerned the ramifications of your actions, and the later ones were dominated by the same question you just asked.

"Most Ministers were in favor of your being given an award at a public ceremony, and fulsomely praised." I can do without the fulsome praise, thought Harry sardonically. "Two ministers, while appreciating your actions, preferred a more sedate response, perhaps a private ceremony. They feel some embarrassment at what you did, since a Japanese would almost certainly not have done it. Even in the face of an urgent situation, no one would act first without seeking permission from above, and almost no one would take the risks you took. Some feel that this points up an embarrassing lack in Japanese culture, one that in this case could have had disastrous consequences. People would feel that we are weak, because it took a foreigner to save us."

"Potter-san," said Sato, "is no ordinary foreigner, I assure you."

"Of course, I understand that," agreed Hayashi. "But many people would not, and would feel ashamed. To some extent, I feel that. Sato-san, you might as well; you were charged with getting the information to higher levels quickly."

"Yes, I agree. I would say I feel ashamed because the ten minutes after Potter-san took off on his broom were the most stressful and difficult of my life, and he was the one risking his life, not me. But I knew he was risking his life and I was responsible for getting him help,

and I was terrified that I might let him down. I was deeply grateful that the Aurors took me seriously.”

“Sato-san,” said Harry gravely, “I’ve been responsible for other people’s lives before, and I know that it’s very scary. You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

Sato nodded to Harry in gratitude. “I felt,” continued Hayashi, “that any such feelings of embarrassment Japanese had due to these circumstances could not be helped, and should not be hidden or downplayed. Many agreed with me; a few disagreed, the Minister most strongly. If we were all true equals, a middle course would have been taken. But the Minister has what amounts to veto power; nothing can be done that he does not approve of, and the final result was the most he would agree to.

“As to his reasons, we can only speculate, which we have done. He has always been more conservative than most; he only allowed you to stay here in the first place because of a strong personal appeal by the English Minister of Magic. He believes strongly in precedent, and dislikes change. But there is another factor that informs our speculation. Potter-san, do you know what the Minister’s name is?”

Harry shook his head.

“His name is Kentaro Morishita.”

The name sounded familiar... Harry’s mouth fell open as he remembered. “Gantaro Morishita...”

Hayashi nodded. “His great-grandfather was the spirit you talked to when you were taken to the meeting with the ronin. We are nearly certain that he is deeply ashamed of this, and for this reason, wishes the public fallout from this episode to be as low-key as possible. At his behest, the newspaper is putting out the line that it was a triumph of the Japanese people, who followed instructions and hastened to their shrines that night, and of the Aurors. Your involvement and that of Harada-san is described as ‘other assistance.’”

Harry chuckled. "I just wish the English papers would start doing that."

Sato briefly explained Harry's situation vis-à-vis the English media. "It is good that you do not take offense," said Hayashi, "but the true version of events has been spreading fast through the grapevine, and many feel that the Minister's actions show a shameful lack of respect for what you have done. This has already become a whispered matter of controversy, which will likely grow larger with time. It could even cause him to resign sooner than he had planned. But for now, nothing can be done about his decision. I am truly sorry."

"Well, thank you for your explanation, anyway," said Harry.

"Will you be headed back to England?" asked Hayashi.

Harry sighed. "I don't think so. I'm not sure where I will go, though."

Sato spoke. "There is something you should know, Harry-san, when you make that decision. The Minister's job, the English Minister, is said to be hanging by a thin thread. He could be replaced at any time. The Minister and I both understood that the next Minister may be tempted to contact whatever country is hosting you and have you returned to England, to serve as a political asset. The Minister requested that I inform you of this, so that you could go to a country from which you could not be called back. I have prepared a list of such countries."

Harry nodded, surprised that Kingsley had bothered. "Thank you. I'll look at it later."

"If there is anything that I can do for you in the next two days, it would be an honor to do so," said Hayashi. "Is there any way that I or my department could assist you?"

Harry thought for a minute. "There are two things. First of all, and this is something I'll be saying to every Japanese person I talk to before I leave... talk to your ancestors, all of them. Ask them how they feel about the Antiquity Link, how they feel about staying around so long. Tell them you want them to tell you the truth, their real feelings, not

just what they think they're supposed to say. Ask them to talk to other spirits about it, honestly. I don't know how common the Minister's great-grandfather's feelings are, but they were enough to almost cause disaster. Re-evaluate the Antiquity Link thinking about the comfort of the spirits, and look into reshaping it, so the spirits that are having a hard time can leave."

"Of course, the beginning of such a discussion is already taking place," said Hayashi. "But it is true that many honored ancestors may hide their true feelings, in the name of tradition and gaman. Also, change comes slowly, especially for such a cherished part of our culture. But I do, reluctantly, recognize the need for these questions to be raised. I promise to do as you have asked."

"Now, then, what was the second request?"

* * * * *

Forty-six hours later, Harry was gathering everything he wanted to take with him. The Satos had insisted that he take his school uniform and the formal wear they'd purchased for him as mementos, as well as a copy of the family picture that had been taken a few nights ago. He also took the books Sato had bought for him, thinking they'd be of interest in the future.

He had received many visitors over the past two days, including some people he didn't know, friends or relatives of the Satos, and some students from the tactical school. All thanked him profusely for his actions, and some apologized for the official reaction to what he had done. He made the same request of them that he had of Hayashi, and all agreed to talk to their ancestors.

I'm going to miss this place, he thought as he packed. Not that I was going to stay here forever, but I suppose it's different to leave when you choose to, and leaving when you have to. Then again, after what happened, maybe it's just as well. I would have been famous again, and I know how that goes. Maybe they treat famous people differently in Japan, but I'm not sure I need to find out.

There was a knock at his door; with his wand, he waved it open. His eyebrows went up in surprise. "Takenaka-san! Please, come in."

Takenaka stepped inside. "The Satos kindly allowed me to come by before you left. I know you are busy and do not have much time, but in addition to thanking you for your actions, I also wished to say that I will miss our practice sessions. I am sure that practicing with you will increase my chances of becoming an Auror."

"I hope so," agreed Harry. "Thanks. I enjoyed it, too. You're very good; I don't think you'll have any problems."

"It's kind of you to say so. You may be interested to know that I talked to my grandfather about what happened, and he also wished me to convey his gratitude. He had been taken over, and said that it was a very frightening experience. He also said that a conversation, an unusually frank one, has begun among the honored spirits about the Antiquity Link. Many do not want it changed, but a few do. Many are still hesitant to offer their true opinion, but at least it is a beginning."

"I'm glad," said Harry. "When I die, I'd certainly like to have the choice."

"I gather the Gift helped you do what you did. At the festival, I saw the shield go up around the gathering of spirits, and wondered what it was."

"I thought you should know that in the future, when anyone criticizes the fact that I move when I duel, I will mention the fact that you do as well, and it is because you do what you need to do, to get the job done. After what you did, that concept may gain currency. I hope it will, anyway."

"I hope so too."

Takenaka nodded. "Good luck in your future." He extended a hand, which Harry shook. "You too," said Harry.

After Takenaka left, Harry checked his bag and made sure he had everything he came with, which of course wasn't much. Sure that he

was finally finished, he went out to the living room and spent a while talking to Yasunori, who had been furious—at least, for him—when he'd heard about the Minister's decision. Harry was touched because he knew it was partly because of the decision itself, but also because it meant Harry would be leaving. They had spent many hours together, and he would miss Sato too, but Yasunori most of all.

Finally, it was time to go, though Sato and Yasunori would accompany Harry to the Ministry. Harry thanked the Satos for their hospitality; they all said they had been very happy to have him there. "And we would say that even if you hadn't done anything heroic," joked Yasunori.

Harry laughed. "I appreciate that." He said goodbye to each of the women individually, then took a Portkey with the two men to the Ministry.

They walked through the halls, which seemed unusually empty; Harry then realized that it was a Sunday. Of course, it would be empty.

They walked into the main working area of the Foreign Ministry, which led to the portals which took one to other countries. On entering the large room, Harry did a double-take on seeing fifty or sixty people, mostly men, in formal or semi-formal dress.

"Arigato gozaimashita," they intoned, bowing, as Harry's device gave the usual translation, 'thank you very much.' "Yoroshiku onegaishimasu," they added, again as one; this one, Harry knew, had no translation. They bowed again. Japanese sure are good at doing things in groups, Harry couldn't help but think.

Harry was touched at the display; he was sure it was at least partly in compensation for what their Minister had done. "It's very kind of you," he said. "Thank you for coming in on a Sunday to say goodbye." They bowed again, this time saying, 'Sayonara.' Hayashi joined Harry, Yasunori, and Sato, and led them into the next room.

"Potter-san," said Hayashi, "I have done as you asked. Five staff members and I spent as much time as possible yesterday and Friday combing the archives, anyplace that seemed as though it might lead

to the information you seek. Unfortunately, the only thing we discovered is that the archives are sorely in need of being upgraded, catalogued, and cross-referenced. I regret that we were unable to tell you what you need to know.”

Harry nodded sadly; he hadn’t expected much. “I understand. I appreciate your spending all that time looking.”

“There is one silver lining, though a small one,” Hayashi went on. “One of my staff members recalled a story about a magical... ‘oracle’ may be the best word for it, an ageless magical wellspring that has a consciousness all its own, or at least, it seemed to visitors that it did. He spent some of his time searching for an account of that, and he found it. It was slightly difficult to read, as it was over five hundred years old, but it could be understood. It was written by the man who encountered it.

“It seems that it is on, or near, a particular mountain in Thailand. Get close enough, and the oracle will sense your presence. It will then make a judgment as to whether your ‘heart is pure,’ and if it is, you will be transported to what he describes as a road. You follow that road, facing ‘trials such as I have never faced,’ according to the account.

“If you are successful, as he was, the oracle will give you the information you seek. But it will ask something of you in return. He wrote that the oracle told him that fewer than one in fifty supplicants get what they seek. He was vague about any further details, recording that the oracle does not want those who seek it to have complete information about what is to happen.”

“Because that would ruin the surprise,” muttered Harry.

Hayashi looked at Sato inquiringly, but Yasunori answered. “He’s being sarcastic,” he informed Hayashi, who nodded.

“Why does there always have to be a trail?” Harry went on. “Why can’t they just see that I’m pure of heart, and give me the information I want without the whole business of trials? It’s not like I haven’t had enough already.” He glanced at Hayashi, then remembered himself.

“Sorry, that wasn’t directed at you. I really appreciate all your efforts, and please give extra thanks to the guy who found this. It may be my only chance. So, how do I get there?”

Hayashi was surprised. “You are going to do it?”

Harry shrugged. “Of course.”

“You seemed worried about the trials.”

Harry laughed, as did Yasunori. “He’s confident he can do it, Minister,” explained Yasunori. “He was complaining because he was annoyed, not worried. Harry is very strong at gaman, but he would much rather avoid having to gaman if at all possible. His culture doesn’t value it like we do.”

“Fascinating,” said Hayashi. “You seem to have gotten quite a cultural education, young man.”

“Both of us did,” said Harry.

“As to your question, I will take you there. Anticipating your agreement, I have set the direction to the Thai foreign ministry, but you will not quite reach it. I will tell you exactly when to step off the magical path, and when you do, you will be within mental reach of the oracle. I do not know how quickly it will sense your presence, so if nothing happens immediately, you should be patient. But if nothing happens over a period of several hours, you may want to consider that it has rejected your unspoken request.”

“What about supplies? Food, and water?”

“The account said, ‘I brought supplies, but in the end I discovered that not only were they unnecessary, but they added to my suffering.’”

Harry nodded. “Well, let’s skip that, then. I suspect there’ll be more than enough suffering as it is, without bringing on any extra.”

Hayashi looked at Yasunori, who nodded.

“Well, this is it, then,” said Harry, turning to Sato. “Sato-san, thank you again for all you’ve done, including putting up with me when I was being very... Western. You helped a lot, at a time when I really needed it.”

Sato extended a hand, which Harry shook. “It was my pleasure. Good luck, Harry.”

Harry smiled at the absence of ‘san,’ an indication that Sato was speaking in Harry’s native cultural context. He turned to Yasunori.

“Goodbye, Harry,” said Yasunori solemnly. “I’ll miss your sarcasm most of all.”

Harry laughed heartily. “You have learned much,” he said, with mock pomposity. “Sadly, you will have no opportunities to use what you have learned.”

“Well, the other two Y’s,” pointed out Yasunori. “We can amuse each other with it, like, ‘Harry would have said such-and-such.’ But seriously, I’ll miss you. Nothing against my sister, but it was nice having a brother in the house for a while.”

Harry nodded, appreciating the compliment. “You, too. Thanks for everything.” They shook hands, and Harry reluctantly turned to Hayashi. “Okay, I’m ready.”

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 19, A Bedtime Story: A series of unexpected visions helps Harry to begin to understand the actions and feelings of others—especially Ginny. But he finds it may be too late to revive the relationship they once had.

From Chapter 19: Ginny let out a loud moan of pain and frustration. “Why didn’t he just stay here? We could have helped him, kept him away from Kingsley, from anyone he didn’t want to be around.”

“I think he’s doing what’s best for him,” said Hermione.

“And what about me?” fumed Ginny. “How long does he expect me to wait for him?”

Surprised, Ron said, “I don’t think he was thinking about that when he left.”

“Obviously not!” she shouted angrily. “But then, what was I ever to him?”

Chapter 19

A Bedtime Story

The portal appeared from the outside like an endless, well-lit corridor with clear walls, ceiling, and floor; Harry imagined this was to give the traveler the best possible view of his surroundings. He and Hayashi stepped through it together.

“Keep walking, slow, even strides,” advised Hayashi. Harry tried to focus on doing so while at the same time looking all around him; it seemed as though he was walking over land at lightning speeds, then suddenly, he was walking on water. “How long will it take?”

“Perhaps two minutes, not long at all. When the time comes, I will say, ‘now,’ and you must immediately step out of the portal on the right side. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I do. I want to thank you again for your help.”

“It is no problem. Now, you must say nothing further; I must concentrate on choosing exactly the right time to tell you when to depart. It should be in about one minute, maybe less...”

Harry was silent, walking at an even pace, waiting for Hayashi to say something. He saw water, water, water, land, trees—

“Now!”

Harry quickly stepped to his right, and though the last thing he had seen was trees, he was suddenly in a vast, open space—and in the middle of a dirt road. There were no trees, hills, or landmarks of any kind. Just a road, straight ahead and on into the horizon, as far as the eye could see. This must be the place, he thought. He took a step forward—

—and suddenly, disorientingly, he was in the Weasley home. Or, at least, it seemed. He didn’t seem to be physically there, but he could see inside it.

Molly was in the living room, reading Witch Weekly. Fred and George walked in, holding their brooms. "Hi, Mum! We're home!" They looked tired and disheveled, but happy.

Their stunned mother leaped to her feet. "Fred! George! What on earth are you doing here? You're supposed to be at Hogwarts!"

"We left, Mum," announced Fred as they walked into the kitchen.

"Our studies are complete," added George, picking up and peeling a banana. "And we're a bit peckish. Had a long fly, you know."

"Stop that!" she shouted, following them to the kitchen and yanking the banana out of George's hand to emphasize her point. "Hogwarts is still in session! You had better start explaining yourselves right this minute!"

They started telling the story of what they had done, their mother getting angrier by the moment. Noticing this, they included less and less story and more and more justification for their actions. "It's like a police state there, Mum! The Ministry has taken over, and they, and Umbridge, aren't being subtle! You'll never believe what they did to Lee, and we knew we were next!"

As they explained what Umbridge had done, and their suspicions that she had done it to Harry—after all, he had known the most useful remedy—she was still angry, but now more at the Ministry and Umbridge. "Nothing to be done, Mum," said George, now eating the banana. "She's got the power, and she's off her rocker."

"Not off her rocker," corrected Fred. "Evil. Anyone who opposes her is the enemy. For her, it's just that simple. If there's a mirror opposite of Dumbledore, it's her. And she's Fudge's bitch."

"Fred! Language!"

"Oh, she's absolutely a bitch, Mum," added George casually. "If you saw half of what we've seen, you'd agree. The last thing she was saying was that she would be happy to let Filch have a go at us, with

none of Dumbledore's restraints on his behavior. Flogging was being brought back!"

"But you didn't have to be so flamboyant! You could have just hung back and kept your noses in your books! Now you can't get your N.E.W.T.s!"

"Mum, please," countered George. "We weren't going to be getting N.E.W.T.s anyway. We've got our business, and we're opening up a shop..."

Harry watched the rest of the scene play out, and wondered why he was seeing it. Suddenly the scene changed, and he was seeing a scene he had lived through: earlier that year, when a boggart pretended to be her family members, dead. Her greatest fear, thought Harry, which later came true for one of them.

Next, he saw Molly and Arthur lying in bed, in their pajamas, talking. "We need to help Dumbledore," Arthur was saying. "If he's reconstituting the Order, we have to be a part of it. It's the right thing to do."

She sighed. "I know, Arthur. I'm just so terrified... what if something happened to you, or the children..."

He nodded. "I hate the idea as much as you do, believe me. But there's nothing that says the children have to fight—"

"You know they will," she interjected. "They're strong-willed, every last one of them."

He smiled. "I know which of us they get that from."

"I'm serious. Even Fred and George will, and now they're seventeen! We can't stop them!"

"I know, darling. But war is coming, and we can fight, or we can keep our heads down. Everyone has to make a choice, including our children."

“But they might look at us as an example!”

“We can only hope.”

“Not this kind of example! We can’t let them risk that!”

“We have no choice, Molly. If everyone who has children doesn’t fight, then very few will fight, and You-Know-Who will win. Then we all die, or live lives no better than a slave. That’s what it’s come down to. I know it’s horrible when it involves the children. But we have no choice.”

Harry could hear the pain and frustration in her voice. “Damn Fudge, damn him for closing his eyes to this... we won’t even have the help of the Aurors...”

“A few,” put in Arthur. “Kingsley, and a few others, will join us...”

Harry then saw a few more scenes: Ron and Ginny back at the Burrow, giving their parents their account of the events of the day Sirius died, Molly’s horror at discovering how close Ron had come to the death meant for Dumbledore, her desperate need to know whether Arthur would survive after Nagini’s attack, and her despair at seeing the injuries Bill had sustained at the hands of Greyback. But in these scenes he not only saw the events, he felt some of what Molly felt when they happened. Not completely, but enough to understand very clearly exactly how she felt, the depth of the impact on her.

Then, the night of the final battle, and Fred’s death. He felt the weight of despair hit her... after all those months of worrying, fearing that this very thing would happen. She wouldn’t believe it, she wanted to die and to kill at the same time. Harry felt it was similar to what he had felt after Sirius had been killed, only magnified several times. No wonder she had insisted on dueling Bellatrix herself.

Then came her vengeful joy at Harry’s victory, followed by the necessity of dealing with the rest of her grief. She poured her energy into moving back to the Burrow, trying to consider herself thankful that more of her children hadn’t died. She talked to Arthur, George, Ron, Percy, telling them to put this there or throw that away,

organizing the process of moving back like a battlefield commander, controlling every step of the process.

He saw scenes in which she sought to assert control over, or give advice to, most everyone she knew, even Kingsley. He saw and felt her hurt feelings when Harry rebuked her for suggesting that Dudley stay with him, and then again when she tried to persuade him to help Dudley with his parents. I'm only trying to help him, she thought, can't he see that? It's too late for Fred, but I can help other people, it's not too late...

It finally hit Harry: he had not been the only person in her life to whom she tried to give unneeded or excessive advice, and it was connected to her mourning Fred. Her worst fear had come true, and she had felt powerless. Reacting to that, she unconsciously sought to assert control over every aspect of her environment that she could. If she could have control, maybe such a thing could never happen again. She never had the actual thought, but Harry knew the scenes he had seen led to that conclusion—

He felt an impact, followed by substantial pain, in his right shoulder, and he was suddenly back on the road where hail the size of his fist was suddenly coming from a dark gray sky. Startled, he grabbed his wand to put up the magical umbrella, but nothing happened. He cried out in pain as another hit him squarely on the top of his head; he tried again with the wand, and again got nothing.

He thought to open his bag, but to get what? He could think of nothing there that would help, so there was nothing to do but avoid the hail, and hope it got no worse. Then he saw a shaft of sunlight a half mile ahead, and realized he had to make his way through the hail. A trial, he thought in annoyance. Naturally, they don't let me use magic.

The hail was falling with just enough space between the hailstones that it would be possible to make his way through them, but intense focus would be required. Another stone hit him, this time on the wrist, and it had enough of a sharp edge that he saw blood. No time to worry about that now, he thought. If I don't get through this, it'll pound

me to death. As fast as he could without being hit, he made his way forward.

It was the slowest half mile he had ever traveled. Five minutes in, his attention drifted slightly, and he was hit in the foot. It was very painful, but he could still move, and did his best to ignore the pain. Focus, he thought, focus on the next step, where the hail is hitting...

There were a few more close calls as hailstones made a glancing impact on his arms and legs, but there were no more direct impacts. Seeing daylight twenty meters ahead, he had to restrain the impulse to run at top speed, knowing it would be highly dangerous. Just keep doing what you were doing...

Finally in the clear, Harry ran ten meters ahead just to be very clear of the storm, then sat down on the dirty road, in pain and panting from the effort and concentration. A minute later he turned to look at the hailstorm, and saw that it was gone. Just road and clear sky, not even residual hail remained on the ground. It was as if it had never happened...

The rules of this game were starting to become clearer. The oracle, or whatever it was, controlled the environment and the physical laws of the environment: magic didn't work, at least not when the oracle didn't want it to. I'm going to have to adapt to that, he thought. I can't take anything for granted. He looked at his wrist; there was a lot of blood on his wrist and hand, but the blood flow had become a trickle. Nothing to worry about, now. He wiped his hand on his dark pants, then took out his wand and tried to clean his hand magically; it worked. Great. Magic sometimes works. Just not when you really need it to.

He stood and walked forward, wondering what would happen next. He thought about the visions he'd had of Molly. Why that? Why was he being shown so much information about how Fred's death had affected her? It's like they want me to feel ashamed of how I acted, he thought. And I do feel ashamed. I just reacted according to how I felt; I never thought about what it was like for her. When Fred died, in the aftermath, I didn't think any further than the idea of, Fred died, Molly's probably really sad. Then it was back to my own problems. It

never came close to entering my mind how bad it was to watch a child die, the effect it could have, the reactions a person might have to it. Of course, like I said to Luna, I don't even understand myself, how could I understand other people? But I'm 18 years old; I'm an adult. I should be able to understand people, or at least, I should try. Not that I was necessarily wrong—she shouldn't be telling me how to live my life—but I should have thought of what it was like for her.

Such thoughts occupied him for the next hour as he walked along the road. Just as he was starting to wonder what was going to happen next, he found himself in another memory. Ginny was five years old, lying in bed, tucked in, Molly sitting at her side, telling her a bedtime story.

“And the evil wizard—he was so bad, so terrible, we can't even say his name, we just call him You-Know-Who—he killed many wizards, he caused terrible pain to many. Nobody thought he could be defeated.

“But one day, he tried to kill a family, a good family that had been fighting against him, trying to stop him from killing people. And he killed the mother and father, and he decided to kill the baby, who was only one year old.” Little Ginny winced in fear; who would try to kill a baby?

“But there was something mysterious and strong about the baby, because when You-Know-Who sent the Killing Curse at the baby, it bounced off the baby's forehead and the evil wizard disappeared. When wizards found out what happened, they were so happy, they celebrated all day long. No more wizards would be killed, everyone could live in peace again. All because of one very special baby.”

Ginny's eyes were wide. “What was the baby's name?” she asked eagerly.

Molly smiled. “His name is Harry Potter. He's still young, but he's growing up now. He's only a year older than you.”

“Can I meet him someday?” asked Ginny excitedly.

"Maybe you will. Now, he's in hiding, growing up someplace no one knows who he is. But he'll probably go to Hogwarts, the school your brothers Bill and Charlie go to now, and Percy will start in a few months. You'll know him by the scar on his forehead, where the curse hit him; it's shaped like a lightning bolt. Now, it's time to go to sleep, sweetie."

"But Mum, why didn't he die? Why was he special?"

"We don't know, sweetie. It's a mystery, and life is full of mysteries. That's why it's exciting. Good night, Ginny." Molly leaned over and kissed her daughter on the cheek, then turned out the light. Ginny slowly drifted off to sleep, her imagination captured by the mysterious boy named Harry Potter.

Five years later, she was sitting in the Burrow living room with her parents, listening to her mother read a letter from her brother Ron. "You'll never guess who I met on the train—Harry Potter! He's kind of quiet, but a friendly bloke. We sat together all the way into Hogwarts. I was so surprised, he doesn't know hardly anything about the magical world—he said he was living with Muggles, and they didn't tell him anything! Can you believe that?"

Molly looked at her husband and daughter affectionately. "Well, it's nice that Ron made a friend, isn't it. And Harry Potter, no less! But it's so amazing that he doesn't even know who he is, poor boy."

"Probably better that way," said Arthur, putting down his newspaper. "He didn't get a chance to develop a big head, maybe he wouldn't be a nice bloke otherwise. It's nice that Ron made a friend, but it really doesn't matter that it's Harry Potter. He's just like anyone else."

"Anyone else who can survive a Killing Curse," his wife teased him.

"Yes, except for that," Arthur agreed.

"Oh, it seems there was a confrontation with the son of those dreadful Malfoys, but Harry stood up for Ron, and they're together in Gryffindor! Oh, it's so nice, Percy can look after Ron, especially as he's a prefect..."

Ginny stayed silent, but her head swam. Harry Potter, friends with my stupid, annoying brother? He must be better than that! If only I could meet him, talk to him...

The next scenes were ones Harry was familiar with, taking place after his rescue from the Dursleys' in the flying car. Ginny struggled with her desire to talk to him, which warred with her acute embarrassment at how she felt about him. Oh, I'm so stupid when I'm around him, she thought, he must think I'm an idiot...

He saw through her eyes scenes from her first year at Hogwarts, when the diary of Tom Riddle caused her such terror, grief, and shame. She prayed that no one would ever find out what she had done, been tricked into doing, and in the end it was doubly embarrassing that Harry Potter saved her life... he knew what she had done, but amazingly, didn't seem to hold it against her... that summer, she longed for him, had daydreams of him suddenly realizing his feelings for her; he had saved her life, after all, just like in the bedtime stories...

But the next time she saw him, he was polite to her, but nothing more... he seemed preoccupied, and barely paid attention to her... her first week at Hogwarts, she cried herself to sleep every night... he would never know how she felt about him... then in her third year, she prayed every night for him to ask her to the Yule Ball, but instead he asked the older, pretty Cho Chang, for whom Ginny instantly developed a passionate dislike—and she turned him down! Incredible! But Ginny was invisible to him, and she knew it, so when Neville asked her, she reluctantly accepted; better that than stay in her dormitory crying. To her surprise, she actually had a good time with Neville, who was very shy, but very kind. He paid attention to her, and was interested in whether she was having a good time, which was more than Harry and Ron were doing with their dates. Even so, she still wished Harry had asked her, and felt ashamed, because Neville had been so kind.

Feeling an emotional wreck the next summer, she confided in her mother, who persuaded her to do her best to put her feelings aside. She knew Harry had had a horrific experience in being abducted and

used to help You-Know-Who come back, and her mother told her that she would help him best by considering herself his friend, and not to force or hope anything would happen. In a long conversation at Grimmauld Place with Hermione, Ginny convinced her that she was over Harry. She nearly convinced herself.

She spent most of her fourth year as Michael Corner's girlfriend, and her fifth year as Dean Thomas's. She enjoyed spending time with both of them, but part of her was pained that Harry seemed not to notice or care. But she knew that he had You-Know-Who to worry about, and the pressure of not being believed by much of wizarding society. He was a man of destiny, and he couldn't be bothered by paying attention to someone as insignificant as her. She was just starting to be able to put him aside, at long last...

Then he kissed her, and it was as if all her dreams had come true. But had they? Part of her was deliriously happy, but part warned her it couldn't last. Why did he like her, anyway? She knew she was considered pretty, even if she wasn't so sure of it herself, but there were dozens of pretty girls at Hogwarts, and he was Harry Potter. Surely any girl would accept him. Why her? She was afraid to ask; she just crossed her fingers and hoped the dream wouldn't end.

But then it did, as she knew it had to. He had enjoyed a brief fling, but now he had to set her aside, and go off to do the Big Things she always knew he would do. He couldn't have her at his side. He said it was for her protection, but what sense did that make? He was the one that needed protection! She wanted to stay with him, and if something happened to her, well, she would take that chance. He constantly took chances; surely he would understand her feelings.

But he didn't. With her last emotional strength, she tried her best to accept it stoically, pretending that it didn't bother her greatly. But it did, very much. He'll take Ron and Hermione into danger with him, she thought bitterly. But not me. They're his real friends; I'm just the hanger-on who spent years making a fool of herself, hoping for a fairy tale to come true. What an idiot I've been...

Still, she wasn't able to resist the temptation to try one last time, giving Harry a kiss on pretext of it being a birthday present,

desperately hoping to rekindle whatever he might have felt. But his mind was not to be changed. Then the Ministry fell, and he was whisked beyond her grasp.

She tried to focus her attention that year on being part of the Hogwarts Resistance, as they called themselves. Neville's daring exploits quickly marked him as the leader of the resistance. She tried to do similar things with sixth and fifth year girls, taking advantage of the fact that as girls, if caught, they probably wouldn't be tortured as some of the boys were being, especially Neville. How can he stand up to that, she wondered. His spirits were always high; it seemed as though he had found his true calling. People always say Harry's so brave, and he is, but Neville's no less so.

One of Neville's best operations was sneaking into the Great Hall in the middle of the night, with Seamus and Corner as lookouts, and writing graffiti on the wall that was programmed to appear at a particular time. So, the next morning, as breakfast was being eaten, a message suddenly sprang to life on the wall, in huge letters: The Boy Who Lived, Lives. Soon, TBWLL was being scrawled anywhere and everywhere at Hogwarts.

One night, on the run from Filch, Neville and Ginny had to duck into a closet to avoid being seen, and soon discovered to their chagrin that Mrs. Norris had taken up residence right outside the door. They knew that any movement of the door might prompt loud meowing, and Filch was undoubtedly still looking for them. For the moment, they were trapped.

They sat on the floor, in almost total darkness. Ginny spoke in the quietest whisper she could manage. "Couldn't we just crack the door open and Silence her?"

"No," Neville whispered back. "This door creaks. I learned that the hard way."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

There was a silence. "How do you do that, Neville? How do you deal with it?"

"With what?"

"They tortured you."

She couldn't see his face, but the shrug was in his voice. "You just hang on as best you can, and wait for it to be over. They don't do it for too long. They don't want to have to be handing people over to St. Mungo's."

He's so brave, she thought. She reached over and put her hand on what she hoped was his knee; as it turned out, it was. "We all support you, you know."

He patted her hand. "I know. Thank you for saying that."

Moving her hand back, she chuckled. "Some of us support you more than others."

"What do you mean?" he asked, sounding surprised.

"Haven't you noticed that Lavender's really got eyes for you? She's always talking to you, thinking of some excuse to be around you." Except actually going on operations and taking risks, she thought but didn't say.

"Well..." She could almost hear Neville blush. "She's nice, and she has been friendly. I hadn't thought of it like that, to tell you the truth. Honestly... please don't repeat this, but... she seems a little silly, the way she was acting with Ron last year."

Ginny stifled a giggle. "Oh, that was disgusting. But would it be so bad to be her Nev-nev?"

He convulsed with silent laughter, his hand over his mouth. "Oh, don't make me laugh, we could get caught."

"Sorry."

"Anyway, also, it wouldn't be a good idea for me to have a girlfriend right now."

"Why not?"

"Because of what I'm doing. She could be in danger from what I do. I couldn't risk that."

She sighed. After a few seconds, she said unhappily, "That's just what Harry said when he broke up with me."

"I'm sorry," Neville said, and she could tell he meant it. "But he's got a point."

"No, he doesn't!" she retorted fiercely but quietly. "I can make my own decisions!"

"And what's he supposed to do if they capture you and say to him, give yourself up or we'll kill her?"

"Let them kill me!"

"Or if they say, we'll torture her, or rape her, or Merlin knows what disgusting thing they might think up? How can he deal with that?"

Ginny was defiant. "If he loved me, he'd take the chance. And I'd be with him, so if I got caught, he'd get caught. So, it wouldn't happen that way."

After a silence, Neville spoke again. "I'm sorry, Ginny. I shouldn't have said anything. I can't say you're wrong. I just know how I would feel if I were him."

She calmed down a little. "We're all in this together. If we love someone, we love them, and we can't pretend we don't to try to make them safer. Love is when you want to be with someone so desperately, you'd do anything, take any risk. Harry doesn't love me. He likes me, I think. But if he loved me, I'd know it. What he said was an excuse, not a reason."

“Now, I wish I hadn’t said anything.”

“It’s not your fault. It’s just life. It stinks.”

“Well, we’re trying to do something about it. So that people in love can be together if they want to. That’s what Harry’s doing too, wherever he is.”

And then maybe he’ll find someone he can love, Ginny barely stopped herself from saying. It’s not Neville’s fault, she knew.

After several minutes of total silence, they heard from a moderate distance the sound of a cat, a half-meow, half-growl. They stood, and Neville slowly opened the door enough to stick his head out. It creaked slightly, but nothing happened. Breathing a sigh of relief, he opened the door wider. “Okay, looks like we can go. But we still have to be careful.”

Now with the door open, they could see each other for the first time in a half-hour. Their eyes met, and exactly at the same time, as if their eyes had communicated and agreed, they fell into a kiss. Arms around each other, they continued for a few seconds, and then it stopped almost as suddenly as it had started. They exchanged another glance, and again, their eyes agreed. That was what it was, no expectations, no promises. They crept back to Gryffindor Tower.

Harry saw other scenes from that year, and also somehow knew Ginny’s general feelings. She was struggling with her impulses: one was to wait until Voldemort was defeated to make any decisions about her romantic life, at which time Harry would have no excuse not to see her if he were otherwise inclined. The other was to act as if she had no tie, and consider herself completely a free agent. On different days, she had different attitudes about her status, but in the end she decided to wait, if only because dating wasn’t really an option. She found her feelings for Neville getting stronger and stronger. She spent more time with him, and she felt that he was interested in her as well, but would do nothing about it while the current situation persisted. Finally, she had to leave Hogwarts, and it became a moot point. She had plenty of free time over the next

several months, and tried not to spend it wondering about who she wanted to be with.

Finally, Harry was victorious over Voldemort, and while the majority of Ginny's thoughts concerned her brother's death, she couldn't help but be pained at seeing Harry walk out of Hogwarts the morning after the battle after being approached by a half-dozen people. He had talked to her briefly, but with people around, and he gave no hint about his feelings. He had not talked to her as if she was special, but just another person he knew and was pleased hadn't died.

She grew more frustrated as two days passed and he made no visit, sent no owl. Then he finally visited because he had to; she had made sure to be in the living room around the time he was expected to come. He clearly hadn't given a thought as to what he would say to her; it had even seemed an afterthought to him that she would be there at all. From his face, she knew that she wasn't the first, or even second, topic on his mind.

After their brief conversation, she went upstairs to her room and sat on her bed dejectedly. I don't know if I can take this anymore, she thought. He says he needs time. A lot of people will say it's reasonable, but how much time? Am I going to just keep waiting forever?

She saw Harry and Hermione walk past her door, and decided to use Fred and George's newest version of Extendable Ears, which were invisible. She listened to their conversation, and felt no better. He can talk to her, but he can't talk to me? Okay, he doesn't know what he wants, and he doesn't know why. Obviously, I'm one of those things. But he doesn't love me, it couldn't be clearer. Her heart heavy, she prepared to return to Hogwarts.

She returned soon after the dementors attacked after Fred's funeral, and was greeted very warmly, with hugs from many people, including Neville, who seemed especially happy to see her. She talked with him and others about what she had done, what they had done, and what they would do now. The dark cloud had lifted. For most of them, anyway.

The scene shifted to a few days later; Harry saw Ginny and Neville talking to him in Diagon Alley, with Dudley looking on. This time, he felt her feelings as they talked, and understood that her comment about 'hiding in Grimmauld Place' expressed her frustration and anger at his attitude. Saying their goodbyes, she and Neville walked on.

"You didn't look happy to see him," Neville observed.

"He didn't look happy to see me," she responded.

Neville looked as if he didn't want to ask, but wanted to know. Finally, he asked. "What happened with you two?"

"Nothing," she said evenly. "Nothing at all." Neville didn't look as though he understood any better, but asked no more questions.

In the next week, she found it hard to stop thinking about him, at least as long as she read the Prophet; he always seemed to be in the news. Gleason's editorial, the news about the bank, his appointment to the Wizengamot... he's going on with his life, bigger than life, and I'm here at Hogwarts... is that part of the reason he didn't come back? Because I'm here?

Then he was kidnapped, and she was able to forget her angst and focus just on hoping he would come back alive. As Harry was so close to the Weasley family, McGonagall kindly allowed Ginny daily Portkey visitation privileges, so she could keep tabs on whatever the news was.

One day she visited the Burrow at seven o'clock, soon after dinner. Oddly, she found no one home, so she took a fireplace to Grimmauld Place; sometimes, people were there. She found Ron and Hermione in the living room.

"Any news?" she asked.

"Yes," said Hermione. "Kingsley was just over here an hour ago."

Ron and Hermione's faces looked somber; she feared the worst. "What happened?"

"They rescued him," said Ron. "Kreacher is dead. But then something really bad happened to him after they rescued him."

"What?" she asked anxiously.

"Um," said Ron uncomfortably, "we can't tell you."

"What?? Why not?"

Hermione explained the Forgetfulness spell as Ron walked over to the empty portrait and shouted into it, hoping to summon Dumbledore. Ginny waited impatiently for him to come. Finally he did, and told her the story.

"Oh, no," she moaned. "That's so terrible. So, where is he now?"

"He left the country," said Ron.

"What??" Ginny shouted, her voice coming near a scream.

"He just Apparated down to Heathrow, Apparated onto a random plane, and took off. We have no idea where he is now."

The news was like a slap in the face to Ginny. She sat on the sofa and put her face into her hands. "I can't believe this! Why would he leave the country?"

Dumbledore spoke. "He said he needed to get away from England, which I found very understandable."

"Did he say how long he'd be gone?" asked Ginny.

"He did not say, or I believe, even know. Based on the situation, I believe it is more likely than not to be an extended period."

Ginny let out a loud moan of pain and frustration. "Why didn't he just stay here? We could have helped him, kept him away from Kingsley, from anyone he didn't want to be around."

"I think he's doing what's best for him," said Hermione.

"And what about me?" fumed Ginny. "How long does he expect me to wait for him?"

Surprised, Ron said, "I don't think he was thinking about that when he left."

"Obviously not!" she shouted angrily. "But then, what was I ever to him?"

"Wait a minute!" Ron shouted back. "Look, you can't think about it like that! Look at what he's been through! He just lost his family, at least as far as he's concerned! He's got more to think about than his girlfriend situation!"

"And if he thought of me as his girlfriend, someone who was really important to him, he wouldn't just leave the country! He'd try to talk to me! If Mum and Dad died, wouldn't you go to Hermione to comfort you, first thing?"

"That's different!" Ron retorted angrily. "Hermione's already my girlfriend! The situation with you and Harry wasn't clear!"

"He had every chance to make it clear! He was avoiding me!"

"He wasn't avoiding you, he just had a lot to work out!"

"That's very convenient; it must be easier to say you have a lot to work out than to tell someone you've changed your mind about them."

"We don't know that he's changed his mind about you! All kinds of bad things have happened to him, it would mess me up too! After he comes back, you'll be able to—"

“I CAN’T WAIT THAT LONG!!” she screamed, shocking Ron and Hermione, who exchanged stunned looks. “I’ve already waited, and waited, and waited some more! I can’t put my life on hold, waiting for him!”

“Got other boys to snog, have you?” asked Ron coldly. Hermione winced. “Busy social life to get back to?”

“How dare you! And you’re a fine one to talk about snogging others while waiting for the one you really want to come around, Won-Won! You have no idea what I’ve been through!”

“And you don’t seem to have any idea what he’s been through, even though we just told you! Been a Horcrux, walked to his death, kidnapped and tortured, sleep-deprived, then put through a test so awful I wouldn’t even wish it on Draco Malfoy! And all you can think about is how it affects you? If you can’t have even that much regard for what’s happened to him, then maybe you aren’t the best one for him!”

Furious, she glared at him. “Go to hell.” She quickly threw Floo powder into the fireplace, and went back to the Burrow. As soon as she got there, she pointed her wand at the fireplace. “Do not admit Ron Weasley, thirty minutes.” She knew it was a serious violation of house rules to do that—no one but her parents were supposed to adjust fireplace instructions—but at the moment, she didn’t care, and she didn’t want Ron coming after her. Not able to face returning to Hogwarts that moment, she ran upstairs, flung herself on her bed, and cried.

Having calmed down somewhat, she spent a lot of time over the next few days thinking it over. Of course she realized that Ron had a point; her distress had to be far less than his, she knew, and her actions could look selfish. But he didn’t know what she had been through emotionally with Harry, over the years. Having already suffered his breaking up with her, she’d waited a year, then a few weeks, then a week while he was kidnapped, and was now facing the prospect of an utterly indefinite waiting period, with absolutely nothing to guarantee that at the end of it, he wouldn’t say to her, “I’m sorry, but I changed my mind. I’m sorry you waited, but I never promised you anything.” It

was too much uncertainty to live with. Despite Ron's cold remark about snogging, it was the uncertainty, the stress of wondering each day what would eventually happen, that she couldn't live with. Not on top of all that had gone before.

The end of the school year was only three weeks away, and it was announced that there would be an end-of-the-year party on the last day. Even before it was formally announced, rumors had spread, and the biggest gossip around the school was who was asking who as their date. No one asked Ginny; she knew it was because most everyone assumed that she was attached to Harry. She also heard through the grapevine that three girls, including Lavender, had asked Neville, but he had turned them down. She considered asking Neville, but she knew that doing so would mean that she was shutting the door on Harry. She knew that she should do it, but she couldn't quite bring herself to.

Ginny was alone in her dormitory, putting some things in her trunk and taking others out, when she suddenly heard a male voice behind her. "Hi, Ginny."

She whirled to see her brother's ghost, his right hand ostentatiously covering his eyes. "Fred! I told you never to come in here! I could be naked!"

"Can't you see I'm covering my eyes?"

She rolled her eyes. "Your hand is transparent, and so is the rest of you. Putting your hand there is meaningless."

"Well, I suppose so," he agreed casually. "But it just shows I'm thinking about it. My eyes are closed, also. Can I open them?"

"Yes, you can. What are you doing here?"

"Spreading the news to the Weasley clan. I just had a chat with Harry."

Despite herself, she was very interested. "How? He's still in Japan, right?"

“Yes, he is. But distance isn’t quite the same for ghosties, and the Japanese have these interesting and unique magical shrines that act as a kind of beacon for ghosts. If it’s active, and any flesh-and-blood person nearby thinks of a particular ghost, the ghost is drawn there. Harry was talking to one of their ghosts—dull and stupid old man, if you ask me—and he thought of me, so there I was. Talked with him for a few minutes.”

“How’s he doing?”

“Not good. It was easy to see that what happened still bothers him a lot. I reckon it’s not the kind of thing you’d get over in a few days. I like to think I helped, but he’s definitely in recuperation mode. He misses us lot, but I think he just can’t be in England right now.”

“Did he say anything about us?”

Fred grinned. “Yeah, if you can believe it, he said, ‘tell Ron and Hermione that I love them and miss them.’ Pretty strong thing to say, for him, but he’s in kind of an emotional place right now. Took me a while to convince Ron he really said it. He’s on the road to recovery, I think. It just may take a while.”

With a supreme effort, Ginny tried to hide the grief that coursed through her mind. Her feelings for Harry were already in the coffin, but this nailed it shut. He’s never said anything like that before, but to them and not to me? What more information do I need? He doesn’t love me. Maybe he never did.

“Thanks, Fred,” she said, as evenly as she could. “I’m glad he’s doing well, but there are some things I need to do here, alone. You should go on and spread the word more.”

He seemed surprised by her attitude; she wondered if he really hadn’t known how the news would affect her. “Right-o, no sooner said than done.” He zoomed out of the dormitory. She felt an impulse to lay on the bed and cry, but she crushed it. I’ve already done far too much of that, she thought. Time to actually do something.

She went to the Great Hall and found Neville talking to Seamus and a few sixth years. I'm not waiting any longer, she thought, even for them to finish this conversation. "Neville," she said as Seamus was talking, "can I talk to you for a minute?"

His eyebrows went up. "Sure." Seamus continued his sentence as Neville got up and followed her to the Transfiguration classroom, the nearest empty classroom. He closed the door behind him.

"What is it?" he asked, clearly curious.

She took a deep breath. "I want to know if you'll go to the party with me."

Neville's eyes went wide. "With you?"

"Yes, with me. As my date."

"As your date?"

Ginny tried to stifle her impatience. "This conversation's going to go a lot faster if you don't repeat everything I say. Can you just answer?"

Neville looked utterly flummoxed. "Ummm... what about Harry?"

"He's in Japan, Neville, and he's not my boyfriend. He broke up with me over a year ago, and it's clear from his actions that that's not going to change. I'm a free agent, and I want to go to the party with you." She stared at him expectantly.

She had never seen him look so unnerved. For half a minute he stammered, seemingly unable to think of anything to say. In frustration, she said, "Neville, I'm asking because I like you, and I thought you liked me. But if you don't want to go with me, then for Merlin's sake just say so."

"No, no," he said quickly. "I want to."

"Good," she said. Almost as an afterthought, she added, "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

He grinned, partly in embarrassment. "Yes, it was."

* * * * *

The next two weeks were the best ones she'd had in a long time. News spread through the school like wildfire, but she didn't care. She was happy.

At the party they danced, ate, talked, and had a good time. This was what life was supposed to be like, she thought. During a slow dance, Neville held her close, and they swayed gently to the music.

"You never told me," she whispered, "why it was so hard to say yes to this. Can you tell me why?"

Embarrassed, Neville asked, "Do I have to?"

"No," she responded. "I was just wondering."

"Well, okay," he said quietly. "Two things. One was... Harry."

"I told you—"

"I know. But he's my friend. And he's Harry Potter. I just have this terror of him coming back and saying Neville, why did you take her away from me—"

"You developed this terror in the two minutes between when I asked you and when you answered?" asked Ginny in surprise.

Neville glanced down in embarrassment. "No. Over a year."

"I don't understand."

"I've... I've wanted you for over three years," he said hesitantly. "Since the Yule Ball."

She said the first thing that came to her mind. "Why didn't you tell me?"

A small smile came to his face. "Like you told Harry you wanted him?"

She slowly nodded. "Okay, I see your point. But it seems different. I'm not Harry Potter. There's nothing special about me."

"I think there is," he said shyly.

She smiled, reaching a hand up to stroke his hair. "Thank you, Neville. You're very special, too." After another minute, she asked, "You really wanted me for three years?"

"I never would have said anything before," he said. "I was always so shy then. But then Harry got you, and I thought, that's it, there's no more hope. How can I compete with him?"

"You don't have to compete with anyone, Neville," she assured him. "I'm with who I want to be with. I'm glad it worked out this way."

"Really?" he asked, looking down into her eyes. She saw kindness and gentleness in his eyes that she'd never seen in any other boy she'd kissed.

She smiled. "Really." She gently pulled his head down to kiss him, a kiss that lasted for several seconds. She knew many eyes were on them, but she didn't care. She was happy, and she knew from his eyes that he was happy too. He wanted her, and she didn't have to doubt it.

When I have children, she thought, I'm going to be careful what bedtime stories I tell them. They don't always have happy endings.

* * * * *

Harry was suddenly conscious again of the fact that he was walking along a dirt road in what seemed like the middle of nowhere. It had seemed like he had experienced all those events in real time, yet it also seemed as though no time had passed. He tried to process all that had come to him.

He knew that these were real events he was being shown, events and thoughts he would have no access to otherwise. He felt both grief and guilt as he trudged down the road. Grief as he realized that he no longer had a choice about whether to pursue a relationship with Ginny, and guilt that his actions had made her suffer so much.

Would I have ended up with her if she'd waited indefinitely? I honestly don't know. I know so little about relationships, I don't know what makes them successful or not. I do know that once I felt better, felt like myself again, I would have gone back and talked to her.

Well, duh, of course you would have talked to her, you'd have to. But what would you have said?

I have absolutely no idea. Maybe when I felt like myself again, I would have known.

Well, then you can't blame her for leaving, then, can you?

No. No, I can't.

Why did I see all that? First Molly, then that?

He thought about it, then realized that in both cases, his actions had caused pain to those he'd dealt with. Well, sort of. Ginny, yes. But Molly, maybe only a little bit. Her pain didn't have that much to do with me. So, what is it?

Looking down, he suddenly realized that the road ahead had changed. Ten meters ahead of him, the road ended in what looked like a black wall that stretched to the left and the right, as far as the eye could see. A man sat at a table in front of the wall. As Harry approached, he saw on the table, of all things... a chessboard, the pieces set up. What the hell is going on, he wondered.

The man, in his forties with dark hair, thick eyebrows, and a lean, angular face, sat on the other side of the table. A chair was on Harry's side of the table; it was clear that he was supposed to sit down. Okay, he thought, let's find out what the rules are. He extended a hand. "Harry Potter."

"Ivan Vladimirovich Lemnec," the man said as he shook Harry's hand. They sat down.

Harry couldn't help but recall the Sorcerer's Stone. "Let me guess. I can't move forward unless I beat you."

"That's right," the man said.

"And how many chances do I get? One?"

Lemnec shook his head. "As many as you need."

Puzzled, Harry asked, "What's the catch?"

"You're not a very good player."

"That's right."

"I am a master," Lemnec explained. "I was one of the ten best players in wizarding Russia, a hundred and fifty years ago."

"You look pretty good for your age," Harry couldn't help but quip.

The man nodded. "I work out."

"Is that a joke?"

"Yes. I died more than a century ago, yet I am here. The normal rules don't apply here. The real-world version of me once walked the same path you walk now. I am real, yet not. My appearance, my knowledge, is now being used by the intelligence whose knowledge you seek."

Harry nodded. "I see. So, if you're a master, how can I possibly beat you?"

"Right now, you cannot."

"Okay..."

“You will play as many games against me as it takes to improve enough to defeat me.”

“How many games will that take?”

Lemnec shrugged. “I cannot predict. I would imagine, at least a few hundred, probably more. Possibly a thousand.”

“Oh, no problem,” said Harry sarcastically. “So, what about food, sleep, that sort of thing?”

“For the duration of this test, such things are not necessary. You will not need food, water, or sleep. Time in the ‘normal’ world will not pass; you could be here for what seems to you as months, but when you are finished, no physical time will have passed.”

“How?”

“You already know. The rules are different here.”

Oh yeah, thought Harry. I forgot. “Will you be teaching me as we go?”

“No.”

“Then how am I supposed to learn?”

“By observing how you lose. You must work out the strategies, the principles, by experience. You must learn how to play like a master, but first, you must learn... how to learn. Your father once said that to fail to learn from your mistakes is a waste. You will play until you learn, or until you give up.”

Like hell, thought Harry. “Okay. Let’s go.”

“A few ground rules. One game follows another; we alternate as White and Black. In chess, there are dozens of types of openings, detailed patterns of all of which one must know to reach my level. You will not be required to learn many of them, as that is more a matter of memorization than learning. I will stick to a repertoire of five basic opening patterns; you will soon know them very well. Also, I

said you must defeat me, but if you achieve five consecutive draws, that is acceptable. I will not offer nor accept draws; they must be achieved by stalemate, repetition of moves, an insufficiency of mating material, or 50 moves occurring with no pieces taken on either side. You may not resign; every game must conclude in checkmate or a forced draw. At the end of each game, if you wish, I will replay the same game with you, so that you may analyze and discover your mistakes.

“Your mind may wander involuntarily, but you may not daydream or otherwise divert your attention deliberately. If you do not give your best effort at any point, you will fail, and find yourself back in the ‘normal’ world. From this point on, I will not speak.”

He took a black pawn and a white pawn, put his arms behind his back, then offered two fists to Harry. He touched the left fist, which opened to reveal a white pawn. He put the pawn back on the board, and moved the pawn in front of his king forward two spaces.

* * * * *

Harry knew it would be a challenge, but he hadn’t quite understood when he started how much of a challenge it would be. After what felt like several days of playing—there was, of course, no way to know how much time had passed, though it was irrelevant, since time was not passing as such—he felt as though he had not improved at all.

After several dozen more games, he felt he was slowly starting to make progress. At the beginning, as he often had against Ron, he lost pieces and pawns due to carelessness: by moving them into a square already attacked by an opposing piece, or by overlooking a move which put two pieces in jeopardy at the same time. He found himself making such mistakes less and less; now, he lost material mainly by failing to see two or three moves deep into a combination. He started to realize the importance of careful calculation, and he tried to think very carefully before initiating a complex exchange of pieces.

The next learning step was positioning of pieces. He slowly noticed that his opponent’s pieces tended to occupy prominent spaces in the

middle of the board, well protected by pieces behind them. He realized that pieces in the middle had more influence, could make more threats, and put the opponent on the defensive. It was desirable to get rid of the opponent's centralized pieces by exchanging them, if possible, or by attacking them with pawns, as his opponent did when Harry tried to do the same thing.

Painfully slowly, he learned basic principles: move your piece to a square where it has the most influence yet is least vulnerable to attack, position your pieces as centrally as possible, prepare carefully before moving pawns forward, get your king to safety before trying to attack the opponent's king, don't move high-value pieces like queens and rooks into squares where they can be easily attacked, and try to avoid recapturing a piece with a pawn, thus forcing two pawns onto the same file where they can't protect each other.

He decided to try a series of games in which he played more defensively, deciding to observe his opponent's reaction, and how he organized his attack. He learned the characteristics of an effective attack: well-thought-out piece positioning, moves which had multiple purposes, and aggression: when on the attack, every move should contain some threat. Lemnec's attacks were relentless.

It felt strange to be able to play game after game, never needing to eat or sleep, but he found that he could, and got used to it. He occasionally found himself drifting mentally, thinking about Ginny's situation, but quickly refocused his attention on the game. Oddly, it was as though he was understanding that situation better with the passage of time, and occasional unconscious thought. He realized that what had happened hadn't been anyone's fault in particular; his actions and reactions were understandable, but so were hers. Sometimes, things just happened in ways that caused problems that were very difficult to get through. Especially when you were the Boy Who Lived. But he still didn't understand why he felt unable to decide what he wanted to do with his future. The feeling that had kept him from pursuing Ginny or a job had been pushed to the background, put off by his time in Japan, where he needed make no decisions about his future. But the basic problem was still there. He didn't know what he wanted to do, and he didn't know why he didn't know. He did know that he would not do any job, including Auror Leader, that he did not

truly want to do. He would not accept a job just because he passed a test, a test he hadn't asked for.

After having played several hundred games—though, of course, the number was nothing but a vague guess—his playing seemed to have reached a plateau; it didn't seem as though he was getting any better. Even though he didn't need sleep, it was hard to keep his concentration up, game after game, especially as he had no idea how long it would take to reach his goal. A few times he briefly considered giving up, but only in moments of great frustration, and not for long. He was stubborn, after all, he told himself. He would stay until the job was done. Now, this is gaman, he thought sardonically.

He finally, excitedly, reached a point where he got to an endgame—each side had a king and three pawns—where he was not at a material disadvantage. He still lost, but felt it was progress. It started to happen more and more, but he would lose every time, even though the material was even, and he realized that there were special endgame principles as well. Lemnec always aggressively moved his king to the center of the board, trying to use it to usher his pawns down the board, and to limit the spaces to which Harry could move his own king. Harry realized that in the endgame, the king was an offensive piece, not a piece that needed to be protected. It was frustrating to get so close and lose, but again, it was progress.

Dozens of games later, Harry achieved a breakthrough: he reached an ending in which he had a king and a pawn, to Lemnec's king. I should win this, he thought. But much to his distress, he discovered that Lemnec was able to position his king in such a way as to block Harry's pawn from advancing, and at some point, Harry was forced into a position in which he had to move his king in a way that would either give up the pawn, or stalemate Lemnec's king. Deeply frustrated, he analyzed the game carefully, trying to determine where he had gone wrong in the endgame. Still, it was a draw, his first. More progress was being made.

Finally—so many games had been played that Harry had almost forgotten that anything existed except chess—he saw more deeply into a combination than Lemnec, and emerged two pawns ahead. Knowing this would be a decisive advantage, he started to play more

defensively, and Lemnec suddenly went on the attack. In the midst of the attack, Harry learned his last, and perhaps most important, lesson: when you have the advantage, press it, be more aggressive. Don't lose confidence in the ability that got you the advantage. As Harry defended against this attack, he suddenly understood this lesson, and changed his tactics: he decided to sacrifice one of his hard-won pawns in order to defuse Lemnec's attack, and regain the initiative. It was a difficult decision, in view of the fact that a win would end this test, and this was his best chance yet. But he felt it was the right decision.

He arrived in the endgame up a pawn, but more importantly, with initiative. Using his king aggressively, calculating every move carefully, he was able to queen one of his pawns just one move before Lemnec could, and so stop Lemnec's pawn. Just a dozen more moves were required before Lemnec was checkmated by Harry's king and queen.

Triumph washed over him, as well as a sense of unreality. It was over. Lemnec extended his hand. "Congratulations."

Harry shook it. "You know, I never thought I'd—"

In the blink of an eye, Lemnec, the table, and the black wall behind Lemnec were all gone; the road was there again, as it had been before.

Harry started walking again, and all the time he had spent playing chess suddenly took on the feeling of having been a dream, or an experience that had happened a long time ago. He had woken up several hours ago in the Satos' home, eaten breakfast, and said goodbye to them. He remembered clearly what he'd had for breakfast, which he shouldn't have been able to, having played chess for hundreds of hours since then. Not fifteen minutes before, he felt, he had finished seeing/experiencing the events in Ginny's life that concerned her relationship with him. Yet he felt he had a greater insight than before, because of the time he'd spent in the meantime unconsciously thinking about it.

An hour passed, and he wondered about the place he was in. Why chess? It seemed like a peculiar test. How did this place get here in the first place? Does everyone who tries get the same test, or are they all different?

Suddenly, in Harry's mind's eye, he was at a wedding. It was a lovely affair, with about forty guests, outside, on a clear spring day. Flowers were in abundance; it seemed as though the wedding was being held in a garden designed specifically for the purpose. The man and the woman were both young and attractive, perhaps in their late twenties.

"Do you, Xenophilius, take Margaret to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

The young man, who with short, black hair was utterly unrecognizable to Harry, nodded happily. "I do," he said.

"Do you, Margaret, take Xenophilius to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

She looked at him lovingly. "I do." They kissed; the scene seemed to Harry to be the very picture of wedded bliss.

The scene shifted to their wedding night; they lay in bed together in the afterglow, talking about their future. She was a magical florist, and her colleagues had been responsible for finding the picture-perfect location for her wedding. He was an up-and-coming young reporter for *Witch Weekly*, and had met her while doing a feature story on floristry. As they talked, their future seemed limitless, to be filled with joy and children.

There was one child, Harry soon saw, a daughter named Alexandra. She resembled her parents equally, and was very cute and happy, the focus of her parents' lives. Harry saw scenes of their daughter's first steps, first words, then later, first day at Hogwarts. He saw scenes from their home life: tucking little Alexa into bed, eating delicious, home-cooked meals, going for family outings in parks, taking overseas trips. Xenophilius was a kind, gentle husband, and it was clear to Harry that he loved his wife and children a great deal, never hesitating to tell them so. It was a normal, happy life, and the

scenes Harry saw were so unremarkable that he wondered why he was seeing them. He also wondered why Luna was not in the picture, but then he recalled that Xenophilius was a much older man by the time Harry met him.

Alexa loved flowers, and after finishing Hogwarts, decided to go into her mother's line of work. They opened up their own shop; it struggled at first, but slowly gained enough business to keep going. Mother and daughter went to international floristry conventions.

During one such trip, Xenophilius was at home, working on an article, when he received an owl with a short, terse message: Please report to the Auror office at the Ministry of Magic immediately. It was signed by the Head of the Auror Office. Wondering what it could be, Xenophilius took the fireplace there a minute later.

A middle-aged woman introduced herself, and had him sit down. "Mr. Lovegood, you have a wife, Margaret, and a daughter, Alexandra, is that correct?"

"Yes," he nodded anxiously.

Her expression was grave and sorrowful. "I'm sorry to tell you, Mr. Lovegood, that your wife and daughter were attacked, and killed, in a small village outside of Cairo yesterday. Here is a copy of the incident report from the Egyptian authorities." She slid an envelope across the desk.

He stared at her mutely. Surely he hadn't heard it correctly. "They're... dead?"

"Yes, Mr. Lovegood. I'm very sorry for your loss." She reached over, patted his hand gently, then stood and left.

Harry felt the emotions that washed over Xenophilius, and knew no words could do them justice. His life had been taken away, in an instant. Sitting alone in the room, not knowing what else to do, he opened the envelope. There were two pages of forms; the first contained a description of the incident as understood by the Egyptian authorities: the two women had visited an area well-known for a

particular rare, magical plant, but it was in a somewhat dangerous neighborhood. Subsequent examination of the bodies indicated that both had died of the Killing Curse, and that the daughter had been raped, apparently twice, by different men. Xenophilus gasped, and the tears started to come. He was sure they would never stop.

The next year went by in a haze for Xenophilus Lovegood. His friends and colleagues wanted to help him, but there was nothing they could do. Never a heavy man, he lost weight, appearing thin and gaunt. After two months off, he tried to do his job, but his articles were much weaker than they had been; some were printed after heavy editing and rewriting, but most were just rejected. Even so, his boss at Witch Weekly didn't have the heart to fire him.

He started to pursue fantastical stories, and annoy his boss with his frequent attempts to write about increasingly outlandish topics. He took a trip to Norway to investigate something he'd seen in the European papers: an interview with a woman who mentioned, in passing, that she'd seen a Crumple-Horned Snorkack. He traveled to Norway and tracked her down.

Her name was Helena Karlsson. She was blonde, thirty-five years old, and very attractive. Xenophilus wondered how it was that such a woman was not yet married, but soon found out that it was because she was highly unconventional.

"Yes, I have seen the Snorkack three times," she told him in moderately accented English. "You have heard of it? I am surprised; the media is usually not interested in such things."

"I... report on unusual things," explained Xenophilus. "So, how is it that you see the Snorkack when no one else does?"

"Well, Snorkacks, you see, are from the twin dimension."

Xenophilus did a double-take. "I'm sorry, the what?"

"The twin dimension," she repeated. "Most people do not know about it; I learned a long time ago. There are many dimensions in the universe, many versions of reality. Each one has a twin, which is

mostly similar, but some aspects are a little different. In our case, there are some creatures which do not originate in our dimension, but we see them sometimes. These creatures are born with the ability to occasionally appear in the twin dimension; the Snorkack is one. Some of our magical creatures, as well, can appear in their dimension.”

“Fascinating,” enthused Xenophilus. “Please, tell me more...”

“There is a spell which one can do that takes you to the twin dimension. I found it by experimenting; there are many interesting spells that I have discovered on my own. One cannot stay long in the twin dimension; only a few seconds. But once, I saw a nest of Snorkacks...”

His editors rejected the article, but Xenophilus was not discouraged. He took many trips to Norway to see Helena, and ended up winning her over; she agreed to marry him and come to live in England. With a small inheritance, he decided to follow his heart and create a new publication, one devoted to the type of news that he felt was underreported by the traditional media.

Finally, he was happy again: with a beautiful new wife and a job he felt passionate about, he felt young again, even though he was a few years past his fiftieth birthday. Age is only a state of mind, he told himself. To his further joy, two years later, a daughter was born. At Helena’s suggestion, she was named Luna: it was a pretty name, Xenophilus agreed, and the moon had an important and underappreciated influence on human events. When she was born, Xenophilus devoted an entire issue of the Quibbler to lunar lore, werewolves, and the various effects of the moon on the human race.

Harry saw Xenophilus at his home, sitting on the sofa, cradling the one-month-old Luna in his arms. “She’s so beautiful,” he marveled, looking first at the baby, then at his wife. “Just like her mother.”

She smiled. “You are a sweet man.”

He suddenly became sober; she noticed the change. “What is it?”

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, it's just that... Margaret often used to say that, those very words."

"I'm sorry," she said gently. "But she was right."

"Promise me something," he pleaded. "We must never tell Luna about my past. She must not know that this is not my first family."

She stared at him, shocked. "Why?"

"I am afraid she will see herself as some sort of... replacement. I do not want the stain of tragedy to ever touch her. And she may fear the same thing will happen to her. I want her life to be happy, joyous, not thinking of past sorrows."

She caressed the baby's head, then took her husband's hand. "Xeno, my love... one of the things that you and I agreed most strongly about, that brought us together, is honesty. We must never lie to each other, or to anyone; we agree on that above all. How can we lie to our daughter?"

He winced. "I do not mean we should lie to her—"

"But a lie of omission is still a lie."

"Not for a child, especially so young a one! She does not need to know, she will not understand. When she is an adult, we will tell her. But please, not as a child."

"Children understand many things, Xeno. More than most adults think." She paused, thinking. "I do not agree with your wishes, but I respect them. So, let us agree on this. We will tell her when she is ten years old, a year before she attends Hogwarts, if she does. A child there may have a parent who knows your history, and it would be very bad for her to find out from someone other than you. And if she for some reason asks before then if you have ever been married, had other children, or any such question which would require a lie to evade, the question will be answered honestly, and explained. Will you agree to that?"

It wasn't what he wanted, but he could hardly argue. "I agree."

That night, Xenophilius gathered what few mementos he had kept from his previous family—a scarf, his wedding band, a brooch his wife had loved, and pictures—and put them in a small box with a picture of tulips on the top. He opened his bedroom closet, created a magical hiding space in the top shelf, on the far right corner, and put the box there. Using his wand, he covered it, and the closet wall looked smooth. No one would know anything was there without doing a Reveal spell. He would show the box to Luna soon after her tenth birthday. But not on the birthday itself; he did not want her birthday to have such an association.

The years went by, and Xenophilius was happy in his new life. His daughter was sweet-tempered and exuberant, full of energy and curiosity about everything. He had been cursed, but then blessed again, and while he was happy, he occasionally worried that what had happened before would happen again. He tried to dismiss such thoughts; just because something had happened once didn't mean it would happen again. Helena tried to comfort him, saying it was natural for him to worry, but there was nothing to worry about.

Harry knew what the next page in the story was. Xenophilius was in his office, which was in the second floor of his home. He heard a loud bang, like an explosion, from downstairs. He and Luna ran into the kitchen at the same time, to find the body of his beloved wife...

In the months following the accident, Xenophilius desperately tried to keep himself together, if only for his daughter's sake. He felt sure that if he and Helena had not had a child, he would have sought a way to end his life, quickly and painlessly. There was only so much heartache a man could bear. But he had to stay strong for his daughter. She was all that remained, all that stood between him and the abyss.

For him, however, staying strong was more a matter of not falling apart, which he barely managed. He wanted to keep her home, not let her go to Hogwarts—after all, Harry Potter and his friends had almost been killed, and run into dangerous traps, which he had written about in the Quibbler. But finally, he realized that while it

would be his emotional preference never to let her go outside the house, into any environment he couldn't control, such a life wouldn't be worth living. With great difficulty, he let her go, admonishing her to be very careful.

The night she left, Xenophilius didn't sleep all night; it was his first time in the house alone since he'd married Helena. Being alone brought back too many traumatic memories. He Summoned the box from his previous marriage down, and looked at the pictures, trying to summon the good memories from his life. As he put it back, he spoke out loud, hoping Helena would hear him. "I'm sorry, my love. I know you said to tell her after she turned ten, but... I couldn't bear it. Not after what happened to you. I promise that I'll tell her when she turns seventeen." He spent most of the night talking to his two late wives, haunted by what he had lost.

Fortunately, as he had asked, Luna wrote him faithfully, often four or five letters a week. He was saddened to hear that she wasn't making friends; she was regarded as strange, and even her dormitory-mates tended to make fun of her rather than get to know her. How can children be so cruel, he thought angrily as he read her letters. Yes, she's unique, and yes, she's not socially adept. How could she be, with her mother's death so recent? Of course, it affected her. Even children should be able to understand that. But a sweeter little girl he had never seen; she was so innocent and kind, even if her mother's death had turned her inward to some extent. Her letters to him were his lifeline.

Clinging to his daughter, he coped with the next five years better than he would have thought possible, though he was still far from happy. In her fourth year at Hogwarts, he was surprised to hear about how the Ministry was controlling the school, and concerned that she had joined a study group headed by Harry Potter. He admired and respected Potter, but knew that he tended to get involved in trouble. He advised his daughter more and more strongly to be careful. Still, he was extremely pleased to be able to exclusively print a Harry Potter interview, conducted by Rita Skeeter, no less! It was the highlight of his publishing career, and he had to make four extra print runs to cope with demand.

But when Luna came home and told her father what she had done at the end of the year, going to the Department of Mysteries, he was appalled. Of course he was proud of her, but was terrified for her safety. He pleaded with her never to do such a thing again.

She looked at him with an expression that cut him to the quick: his kind, adoring daughter was disappointed with him. "Daddy, Harry and the others are my friends. You were sad that I didn't have any friends, and now I do. We have to help our friends. Harry was desperate, he needed our help."

"Darling, I understand. But you're all that I have left. I need you, more than I think you can know."

"I understand," she assured him. "I need you too. And this isn't something that's going to happen all the time, I promise. This was a very unusual situation."

"Luna, honey, You-Know-Who has come back. There may be many more unusual situations."

"But we have to help Harry! I'll try to avoid dangerous situations. I won't go looking for them. But we have to support him. Please promise me you'll support him, keep writing about him in the Quibbler. He's very special, and very brave. We have to do what we can."

Xenophilius felt a mixture of pain and pride. Why does my little girl, the last thing keeping me in this life, have to be so brave? But she was right, he knew. "All right, Luna. For you, I'll do it." He wondered why she wasn't in Gryffindor.

For the next year, all was well, but there were ominous rumblings. Dark forces were starting to gather, Xenophilius knew. He fought to be brave, to follow his daughter's example. But it was difficult for him in a way she couldn't know.

Then the government of Pius Thicknesse took over, and Xenophilius had to make the hardest choice of his life. It was far from certain that the government was controlled by the Dark forces, but many thought it was. Dared he continue to support Harry Potter in print? Again, his

daughter pleaded with him to continue, and again, reluctantly, he agreed.

Then came the day he had dreaded. Wizards who didn't look like they worked for the government in an official capacity visited his home, telling him that his daughter had been arrested for causing trouble at Hogwarts, though they would give no specifics about the accusations, or any trial date. They let him know that things would go better for her if his magazine, small though it was, were to 'support the government in this difficult time.' Nearly frantic, Xenophilius pleaded with them to release his daughter, promising he would print exactly as they liked. They told him that they would 'observe' the situation for a few months, after which he would get more information on his daughter's disposition.

Desperate, Xenophilius set about preparing the strongest pro-government publication he could imagine. He hoped beyond hope that his daughter was being treated well; his mind swam with the worst possibilities... beatings, torture, rape... memories of his first daughter kept coming back to him, all the times he'd tortured himself by imagining what her last hours had been like... and now his daughter was helpless, in whose hands he had no idea. The only thing that kept him going was the knowledge that she needed him.

And finally came the day that Harry Potter and his friends came knocking on his door. Desperately trying to hide his true feelings, he realized that this might be his best, perhaps only, chance to free his daughter. He briefly considered helping Potter, but the mental image of his daughter being brutalized compelled him to believe that he had no choice. He got away as quickly as possible and sent a message to those who had threatened him; it never consciously occurred to him that this was something his daughter wouldn't want him to do. There was simply no choice.

But Potter discovered his treachery, and barely managed to escape. Xenophilius was sent to Azkaban, where he suffered as he had never suffered before. The dementors sucked all the happiness away, not that he had much to begin with, at that point. But for months, nothing went through his mind but the darkest of thoughts, of which he had plenty...

One day, after he had lost track of the days of misery and suffering, the dementors were pushed back with Patronuses and the gates of Azkaban were opened. All that were there were to go free. Courtesy, they were told, of Harry Potter's stunning defeat of You-Know-Who. Deep shame immediately struck Xenophilius, who knew that but for fate, wizarding society would be firmly in the grasp of You-Know-Who for years to come due to his actions.

He went home to find his daughter, and was ecstatic to find her alive and well. But even that pleasure was diminished by her inability to forgive him for not helping Potter, regardless of the consequences to her. He was shamed, for he knew she was right. All the same, he didn't see how he could have done otherwise. With a heavy heart, he watched her leave their home to go to the funeral of the Weasley boy, from where she would go directly to Hogwarts. They were brave, he thought bitterly, they all fought with all their strength. But they had seven children; I only have one. They could risk it better than me. He knew it was a terrible and uncharitable thought, but again, he couldn't help it. To his lack of surprise, Potter couldn't forgive him either, though his letter had not been unkind. Xenophilius knew he deserved no better.

Luna soon sent him an owl telling him that she would be staying at Hogwarts for most of the summer, for the special classes that had been announced. He was even further pained, for even though his daughter couldn't respect him, he still cherished her company. This is my punishment, he thought, for not doing as she would have wished. And for not obeying her mother's wishes and telling her about my past. Maybe if I had, she could understand...

His health steadily deteriorated over the next few weeks; it was as though he could feel his life force ebbing away. The last year had taken whatever vitality he'd had left, and he would welcome death when it came. He would leave his daughter behind, but she was now an adult, with her own life to lead. She was respected, had friends, he had done all he could... lying alone in bed, in the darkness, he prayed that she would somehow understand.

One day, he awoke from a long daytime nap feeling very weak; he knew the end was near. To his shock, he heard one of the sweetest sounds he could have hoped to hear. "I'm here, Daddy."

At first, he thought he was hallucinating. He slowly turned his head. "Darling?"

She reached out and took his hand. "Yes, it's Luna. I'm very happy to see you."

He gripped her hand with what remaining strength he had. "Luna, my darling... I'm so glad you could come. I thought you were in the summer session."

"I... did my best to get here. I felt as though you would need me."

"Just in time," he said weakly. "You look wonderful, darling. You look so... grown-up. A beautiful young woman." She seemed to have changed a lot since he'd seen her; maybe it had been longer than he'd thought.

"It's very sweet of you to say that," she smiled. "You always thought so."

"Because it was always true." There was a silence, then he spoke again. "I don't have long, Luna. My time is almost here."

Sadly, she nodded. "I know."

He nodded approvingly. "I told you never to lie to me."

"And I never have," she said solemnly.

"My good girl. One last time before I go, it's all I could have asked for." He looked at her a little more closely, and said, "That's a very nice pendant. Is it new?" Viewing the memory, Harry couldn't make out any details of what Xenophilus was referring to.

She smiled and fingered it. "Yes, it is."

He nodded, so weakly that one could barely tell it was a nod. "It suits you."

"I think so."

"Where—"

"There's one thing I want to tell you." She gazed into his eyes and said, "I forgive you. For what you did with Harry and the others. I'm sorry I couldn't forgive you then, but I can now, and I do."

He was stunned; he looked at her disbelievingly. Harry knew that any other father would accuse his daughter of telling a dying man what he wanted to hear, but Xenophilus would not entertain the thought. "Why?" he croaked.

"Because I know," she said, her eyes starting to fill with tears. "I know about your first wife, about Alexandra. I know what happened to them."

Harry had never seen a person more shocked. "How? When?"

"It... was not so long after I didn't forgive you before. Now, I understand. You had already endured so much, too much." She waved her wand, and the box covered with tulips came floating out of the closet. She caught and opened it, taking out the small photo album. "I had always wondered why there were so few photos around, of you as a young man. You had a very nice family." She looked up, and saw the tears streaming from his eyes. She wiped them away with her hand.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry I never told you—"

"It's all right—"

"She told me to, your mother. I just couldn't... especially after..."

"I understand," she said. "It's a hard thing, for a child. I can easily understand why you didn't."

She stroked his hand gently in the silence. “Also... I talked to Harry before I came here.”

He looked confused. “I thought... he was overseas...”

“He’s back. He asked me to tell you that he forgives you too.”

Xenophilius closed his eyes; a few more tears came. “It’s so... kind of him... he’s a good man, better than I could ever be—“

“Daddy,” she gently admonished him. “You’re a very good man. You’ve just had more than your share of tragedies.”

“So... has he... but look at what he’s done. It’s all right, darling, it’s no shame to... not be as good a man as he is. I’m... glad he’s your friend. Please help him if you can.”

“I have, and I will.”

“Good,” he gasped. “And promise me one thing... promise me that you’ll have a happy life.”

She smiled, absently touching the pendant. “I promise. And, Daddy... will you do one thing for me?”

It was very easy to see the love in his eyes. “Of course, darling. If I am capable of it, I will.”

She Summoned a jar, and handed him her wand. “Would you give me a few memories? Of you, Margaret, and Alexandra?”

“Of course.” He was silent, thinking, and then with her help, he started to transfer the memories, the silvery strands starting to fill the jar...

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 20, The Gringotts Massacre: Harry’s visions continue, as he is shown events from a hundred years ago, during the last conflict between goblins and humans.

From Chapter 20: "Do not presume to tell me what my wisdom is," said Dennekin dangerously, his tone suggesting a man with a short fuse. "You do not want the situation to escalate, because you would find yourselves on the wrong end of the scythe. As for me, I would double my popularity by issuing a three-word proclamation, 'kill all goblins.' This, to me, is wisdom."

Chapter 20

The Gringotts Massacre

The images and feelings ceased, and Harry suddenly realized that he was on the dirt road, head in his hands, fighting back his own tears. A few escaped; he wiped them away, and tried to collect himself. He stood, and started walking.

I'm surprised Luna lied to her father, he thought. She knew how important not lying was to him. But I guess she figured he was going to die soon anyway, and she wanted him to go out happy. From what I saw, he probably would have been happy just to spend his last hours with her. But maybe she wasn't sure, and I definitely wouldn't blame her for what she did. I would have forgiven him if I'd known what he'd been through before.

It's like what Aberforth said: don't judge people, because there are always things that would make you judge them differently if you knew them. I'm just getting to see them, but most people don't. Is that what this is? What the trials are? I get to see my own mistakes, the things I would have done differently if I'd known better? Been more tolerant of Molly, trying to cope with Fred's death by grabbing control wherever she could... talked to Ginny more, told her how I felt, or made more of an effort to tell her why I couldn't, not knowing how painful it was for her all those years... forgiven Xenophilius, if I'd known...

But I didn't know, and we can't be expected to know that kind of thing. Certainly not the Xenophilius thing, anyway. The Molly thing, maybe someone could guess, but I'm terrible at psychology. The Ginny thing, maybe, but understanding other people—like I said to Luna, in that letter—isn't exactly my strong point. Maybe it needs to be stronger. His life was so hard... he's right, mine's been too, but I've never lost a wife or a child. Looking at what happened to him, I pray I never do.

I was thinking before, when he asked me to forgive him, that if I'd been in his position, I'd have helped me, taken the chance. But I didn't know his history. If I'd been through what he had, could I really do it? I don't know, even though I saw, and kind of felt, what happened to him. I guess we can never really know, but just have

compassion for people, because we don't know everything about them.

The black wall appeared, and a man stood in front of it, holding a wand. He was in his fifties, with mostly gray hair, but looked strong and vigorous. What now, wondered Harry. He extended a hand. "Hi. I'm Harry Potter."

"My name is not important, nor are social pleasantries," the man said.

Fine, be that way, thought Harry, withdrawing his hand. Down to business. "Let me guess... dueling?"

The man nodded. "I was considered one of the best duelists of my time."

Harry thought he saw a resemblance to a Chocolate Frog card. "You're not Merlin, are you?"

The man scoffed. "Hardly. I was his contemporary, though. He was an average duelist at best. His specialty was political intrigue, and taking credit for the work of others. He spent his last thirty years writing stories about himself, so that he would go down in history as the greatest wizard of all time. The only way in which he was truly legendary was as a self-promoter."

Wonder if that's really true, thought Harry, or if this is someone who was a rival, and holds a grudge.

"It is true, I assure you," said the man with mild indignation, "though of course you cannot confirm it by reading history books."

Now, Harry was surprised. "You can read my mind?"

The wizard nodded. "This was a natural magical skill I possessed when I lived in the physical world. I did not care for it much—thoughts of others often intruded uninvited—but I learned to deal with it. This is how I know Merlin was a self-promoter: I saw it in his mind on more than one occasion. I once made a subtle reference to it—I was somewhat younger than him—and he became so incensed that he

nearly ordered my death. I learned to become more circumspect about how I used my ability.”

Harry chuckled. “I’ll bet. So... I have to beat you to get by?”

“Three out of five,” the man confirmed. “I will also be using what your Japanese friend referred to as the Gift.”

“You had the Gift and could read minds? Wow!”

Impatiently, the wizard shook his head. “I said I would be using the Gift, not that I had it. I have it now, courtesy of the intelligence behind this environment. You will have to beat me in two ways: with both of us using the Gift, and with neither of us using it. I will be reading your mind all the while.”

“So, you’ll always know what I’m going to do, every time,” said Harry incredulously.

“That’s right.”

“So how am I supposed to beat you?”

The wizard appeared very annoyed, as if Harry was wasting his time. “That is the point, isn’t it. Trials are supposed to be difficult. Would you like something else instead? Perhaps a pack of Nundu charging you?”

Harry’s eyebrows went up. “Uh, no, no thanks. This is good.”

“Or at least, it seems better. So tell me, what would you do in that situation?”

“Run very fast?”

The man chuckled. “For someone of your reputation, you are surprisingly without pretense or self-importance. A refreshing trait, for someone with my ability. I know better than most that for most men who appear modest, ‘appear’ is the key word.

“Unlike the chess master, I will be giving you a few pointers as we go. But we will not have infinite time. We will have one hundred hours with the Gift, and one hundred hours without it. If you cannot defeat me by then...”

Harry nodded; he would have to focus very hard. One hundred hours was not a lot of time to learn a complex skill, even one he had some knowledge of. “I understand.”

“Then, we begin.”

* * * * *

Again walking down the road, Harry noticed that as had been the case after he'd spend thousands of hours playing chess, the few hundred hours he'd spent dueling had faded to the back of his mind, as if a slightly distant memory. He wondered if he could have done it without the training he'd received from Aurors in the other not-reality, and the practice he'd had with Takenaka; practicing with someone else who had the Gift was quite different from normal practice. The hardest part of what he'd just done was overcoming the advantage the man had of being able to read his mind. Harry had eventually learned that it was a little like the Muggle sport of tennis: if your shot is good enough, your opponent won't be able to return it even if he knows it's coming.

He chuckled as he recalled the man's annoyance when Merlin had been mentioned. Could the most legendary wizard in British history really just have been an influential wizard who knew how to make himself look good? A more clever and conniving version of Gilderoy Lockhart? If so, what motivated someone to spend all that time and effort to make himself look good for his descendants, even though he would be dead? Harry couldn't fathom it. But, I suppose, everyone's different...

Funny how it seems like I've been on this road forever, but I'm still not hungry, haven't even had to go to the bathroom. Even if we don't count the dueling and the chess, how many hours has it been? Or is time even passing at all, even if I'm not doing those things? Weird. Of

course, if I've learned one thing, it's that magic can be weird sometimes.

"Goblins, rise! Get to your feet, and make it quick!"

Harry saw a large cage, with sixty or seventy goblins crammed into a space that could comfortably hold perhaps half that number. He could see the magical field that surrounded the cage, preventing the goblins from doing their native magic. The goblins all stood.

"Who is your leader?" demanded the human who was approaching the cage. He was a young man with blond hair, wearing crimson robes, the same color that Aurors now wore. Could he be an Auror? Harry wondered. He hoped not. He somehow knew the scene had occurred a hundred years ago.

"I am the leader," said a goblin, a slightly older one. Harry found it very difficult to tell one goblin from another; they tended to look the same to him.

"What is your name?"

"My name would be quite unpronounceable to humans," replied the goblin, with dignity. "We do not take names humans can understand. My name is—" The goblin let loose a series of sounds that sounded to Harry like, well, gobbledygook.

The human stared at him coldly. "Exit the confinement area. Only you."

The door swung open, the goblin exited, and it closed again. As soon as the goblin stepped out of the magic suppression field, the human swung his wand as he would a sword... and the goblin's neck was suddenly, neatly severed from his head. The goblins screeched in outrage and protest.

"Tomorrow," the man shouted, repeating himself as the din slowly quieted. "Tomorrow, by this time, you will have selected a new leader. And... I strongly suggest that he have a name that humans can say

easily, and far less pride than his predecessor had.” The man walked away.

Harry heard some of the conversations that took place later in the cage, which was in a field a few hundred meters away from a large mansion. From their conversations, Harry understood the situation: goblins had coexisted with humans for a hundred years peacefully, but that had been broken by the actions of a rich and powerful Minister of Magic, William Dennekin. Legend had grown of a goblin who had the uncanny ability to predict the future; he had made large amounts of money for Gringotts by successfully trading in foreign investments. Though already rich, Dennekin resented that a goblin should have such ability. He quietly requested a meeting with the goblin, and when the goblin came, had him abducted. No other goblins knew where he had gone, so they had no idea he had been kidnapped, and the Ministry pleaded ignorance.

After a year in captivity, the goblin managed to get a message to his fellows through a sympathetic servant of Dennekin’s. The goblins were outraged; for a hundred years, humans had respected goblin law and possessions, but now their leader had crudely violated their agreement, and the person of one of their most prominent citizens. Against the advice of some who called for negotiations, the goblin leadership decided to mount a targeted raid against the Minister’s home.

Unfortunately for them, it turned out that the Minister had discovered the treachery of his servant, who was promptly sent to Azkaban. Anticipating a rescue attempt, he greatly increased security around his home. Two days later, a hundred goblins attacked, walking right into a trap. Dozens were killed, and the rest were captured.

Learning of the capture, one of the goblin leaders—one who had counseled against the attack—emerged from Gringotts, accompanied by his grandson, who had only recently reached the age of adulthood. His grandson insisted on accompanying him, for security’s sake. “I will not need security,” his grandfather told him. “This is not that kind of situation. If he kills me, then he kills me.”

“An envoy of peace? They would do such a thing?”

"I hope not, but my point is that security will not be necessary." Nevertheless, he allowed his grandson to come along.

Humans having surrounded Gringotts, the two goblins were apprehended as soon as they left the building. Held in the Ministry, they were interrogated as to the whereabouts of the nearly goblin village residents, who had cleared out of their homes as soon as the raid failed. The older goblin said that he didn't know. He was given Veritaserum, which the humans knew had for goblins a side effect involving intense sensitivity to noise and most other stimuli; after using it, even a whisper sounded like a shout. A standard interrogation was similar enough to torture that the difference wasn't important. His grandson was spared, as through his pain he insisted that the younger one could not and did not know where the others were.

They were brought to the captives, but were not allowed to talk to them; the captives were asked if they agreed to consider this goblin their leader. The captives agreed, and the two goblins were then escorted to the Minister's residence, under heavy guard. The place could hardly have been more opulent; everything looked to be handcrafted and of the highest quality, including some items that were clearly goblin-made. They were told that they should bow deeply when first meeting the minister, 'to show your repentance for the attack.' The older one saw by looking at his grandson that he would prefer to die than do so, but had promised his grandfather that he would do as he was told.

Kept waiting for over an hour, they finally met the Minister, and bowed as they had been instructed. Dennekin was a tall, heavysset man with a long face punctuated by a large chin, along with black hair, a hooked nose, and large green eyes. He sat in a large, comfortable leather chair, while offering the goblins no seats. "So, tell me why I should free these criminals, whose objective was to kill me and my family, and tell me why all of goblin society should not be punished for their actions."

"I apologize deeply for their actions, Minister," said the older one. "They were operating under the belief that one of our famous citizens

was being held here. Their intention was simply to rescue one of their brethren.

“As for your second question, we are a peaceful people in general. Such a thing has not happened for a very long time; this was a regrettable, one-time aberration. I would implore you, in your wisdom, to help me see to it that the situation does not escalate.”

“Do not presume to tell me what my wisdom is,” said Dennekin dangerously, his tone suggesting a man with a short fuse. “You do not want the situation to escalate, because you would find yourselves on the wrong end of the scythe. As for me, I would double my popularity by issuing a three-word proclamation, ‘kill all goblins.’ This, to me, is wisdom.”

Harry could feel what both goblins felt: the older one was desperate, feeling it was his first priority to save as many goblin lives as possible, whatever it took. The younger one burned with righteous fury, angry both at their general predicament, and the arrogance of this decadent human.

“I understand your people’s anger, but the fact remains that a conflict would benefit neither of our peoples, as history suggests.”

Dennekin’s eyebrows rose slowly. “Are you threatening me?”

“Of course not, Minister. I was simply stating what I believe to be a historical fact. Clearly, my people would suffer much more than yours in such a situation.”

Mollified, Dennekin nodded. “You’d do well to keep that in the front of your tiny little brains, at all times. Now, let’s talk about what you can do for me, so I have some alternative to writing a new chapter in history.”

“Yes, Minister, but first, to help me calm down my people, I would like to ask if you have any information as to the whereabouts of our missing goblin.”

“Are you saying you believe that I personally abducted one of your people?”

The goblin knew that if he answered in the affirmative, all bets were off. “No, Minister. It is simply that we received a note, written fluently in our language, indisputably written by him. It may be that someone impersonating you has done this, and he believed something that was not correct. In any case, I would be grateful if you would make inquiries among your population, and perhaps institute a search.”

“And if I do not?”

“This is not a threat, Minister,” said the goblin calmly. “I am... simply asking for help.”

“Most of our people are disinclined to ‘help’ goblins right now. I will see what I can do.”

“Thank you, Minister.”

The negotiations went on for twenty minutes, after which a break was called. The two went outside; they would be allowed to talk to their captive comrades.

“Grandfather, how can you accept such demeaning treatment?” demanded the younger one. “Everything he said was a lie—”

“Silence!” Breathing heavily, the young goblin managed to comply. “I would remind you that I did not ask for you to come; you insisted. You will not say another unauthorized word for the duration of these negotiations. Do you understand?” After a pause, the young one nodded.

As they walked, the older one explained. “Of course, he was lying. That will happen in all such negotiations. And yes, his treatment is demeaning. I have dealt with many good, noble humans; this is clearly one of the worst of their kind. But it is he whom we must deal with, and so I do what I must to prevent further bloodshed. This is about practicality. I know you will say that I lose my dignity by accepting such treatment. But I say that I gain dignity, true dignity, by

putting the interests of my people above my personal desires, above my ego. I will do the best I can for my people, but one does not have much leverage when one is at the point of a knife. If I have to put up with his arrogance and crudeness, then I will. That will provide the best result, in the long run.”

They approached the cage, and spoke to the senior goblin inside, who indignantly told him what had happened to their previous leader. “These humans are barbarians! We must fight them!”

The goblin could see the agreement on his grandson’s face. “No! I counseled against this attack. This should have been handled through negotiations!”

“They kidnapped one of our own, and they have been torturing him! We can hear his screams, even from this distance!”

“I am doing what I can, but fighting is suicide—“

“It is preferable to being trodden on, used for our skills but then violated any time they please—“

The older goblin finally lost his temper. “Fine! If your wish is to die, they will oblige you! Just tell their guard!” The caged goblin stared daggers at the free one, saying nothing. “You have already chosen to fight, and lost,” the older goblin continued. “Of course they are behaving contemptibly, but that is not the point. I am doing my best to preserve the lives of our people, for the good of all. I hope to reach a settlement that allows our people to go back to their homes, as well as achieves your release. But if you do not wish to benefit from my actions, then please let me know, and I will strike from my negotiation points the issue of your release.”

Again, there was no response. “I thought as much. Well, I thank you for your support,” the older goblin said with heavy sarcasm, “and I will do my best to see to it that you are with your families again soon.” He walked away, trailed by his grandson, to whom he spoke. “It is easy to be ruled by your pride, and to forget that your pride may be paid for by others, in blood.”

The next meeting was held the following day. An agreement was reached in which the goblins would pay the Ministry three hundred thousand Galleons over three years as punishment for the attack, in return for which the captives would be released on the condition that they never mix with humans again, and the goblins could return to their village; the Minister would announce that the crisis had been resolved, and that attacks on any goblin village would be prosecuted.

As they wrapped up their business, Dennekin left the room, then came back after a few minutes. "I have some news," he said brusquely. "The goblin you seek, the missing one, has turned up. He was found dead, not far from one of your villages. He must have been trying to return, and one of our people angry at the attack was trying for revenge."

Not just a lie, thought Harry, but one deliberately calculated to be offensive in the extreme. Dennekin's tone was one of 'serves him right,' while at the same time not making an effort to pretend he was telling the truth.

The older goblin seemed to marshal his willpower. "I... understand. This is most unfortunate. But it will not affect our agreement."

"Glad to hear it," said Dennekin sarcastically. "Some of my advisers say I'm being too generous. You agree, don't you?"

Keeping a poker face, the goblin blinked a few times. "I cannot argue with you."

Dennekin chuckled, seeming to find the comment genuinely humorous. "Truer words were never spoken. Now, there is one more piece of business. You are now the leader of the goblin community?"

The goblin nodded. "The others, out there, have confirmed it."

"Good." Dennekin's eyes became hard. "This agreement takes some measures toward compensating our society for what was done, but it does not erase the personal offense to me. My home was assaulted, the lives of my family and myself put in danger. There is something I must have, or there will be no agreement, and you and the young one

will not walk out of here alive.” He took out a small vial of liquid; recognizing it, the goblin couldn’t help but recoil slightly.

“You will swear, under Veritaserum, that as long as you are the leader of the goblins, there will be no more attacks against humans. Then, to symbolize the goblin community’s apology to me personally...” He crossed his legs in such a way that the sole of his right shoe was more or less facing the goblins. “You will lick the bottom of my shoe.”

Unable to bear any more, the young goblin exploded in fury. “You cannot possibly—“

“Crucio!” shouted an Auror who was part of the Minister’s security team. The young goblin screamed; the older one pleaded with the Auror to stop. After ten seconds, Dennekin signaled the Auror to stop. The goblin lay gasping on the floor.

Harry felt the older goblin’s thoughts and feelings. Before his grandson’s outburst, he had been wondering how he could possibly subject himself to the human’s disgusting demands. But the attack on his grandson reminded him that others were depending on him; their lives were in his hands. With all of his willpower, bracing himself for what was to come, he opened the vial and drank the Veritaserum. To his grandson’s horror, he then did as the human had demanded. Harry winced, feeling deep sympathy and respect for the goblin.

Two days later, the goblins were all released, Gringotts was open for business again, and goblins were starting to return to their villages. The older goblin, recovering from his last bout with Veritaserum, read in the Prophet the account of the story that would be recorded by human history: that the goblins, acting on shaky intelligence, had attacked the home of the Minister in a quest for revenge. Some had been unavoidably killed, but after two days of negotiations with the goblins, the Minister had generously agreed to forgive the goblins this offense, in return for modest reparations. A Prophet editorial, noting the anger and even bloodlust among the human population, praised the Minister’s moderation and evenhandedness.

Harry then saw the younger goblin reading the same issue of the Prophet, struggling to tame the fury he still felt at seeing his grandfather abused and disgraced by the humans. I will never forget, the goblin thought. I will never forget.

Harry had trouble telling one goblin from another, but he had no trouble figuring out that the young goblin he had seen would, when he grew older, become recognizable as the one who had interrogated him after he had been kidnapped. He saw brief scenes from the goblin's life as he grew older, becoming a powerful man in the goblin community, finally becoming its leader. The goblin leader did not have absolute power, but he had very substantial influence; it took a concerted effort by those below him to override his decisions.

His life went along normal lines; many years passed, and nothing out of the ordinary happened. He dealt with many humans, most of whom were polite and reasonable, but he never forgot what he had seen. He was sure that this was the humans' true nature, and any politeness and civility was an artifice.

After the goblin had been the leader for ten years, Voldemort took over the Ministry. One day, the goblin was sitting in his office at Gringotts, perched above the main floor, where he could get a good view of everything that happened. He saw Bellatrix Lestrange walk in, accompanied by two Death Eaters.

One of the Gringotts managers approached her. "Madam Lestrange, what can Gringotts do for you today?"

She handed him a piece of paper. "You will transfer to me all of the gold from these individuals' vaults."

He looked around hesitantly. "Surely Madam Lestrange knows that—"

"You cannot do such a thing," she finished. "The government authorizes you to do this. These individuals are enemies of the government; we require their gold in compensation for the damage they have done to us." Harry saw that his name was on the list, as was Kingsley's.

“I am very sorry, Madam Lestrangle, but we cannot—“

She sent a Stunning spell at him; he was blasted back against the nearest desk, and he crumpled to the floor. “Would anyone else like to tell me what I can and cannot do?”

Having left his office soon after Lestrangle came in, the goblins’ leader approached her, alone. It infuriated him to temporarily overlook what had been done to the Gringotts employee, but he had to handle the situation. “Madam Lestrangle, I am the highest-ranking Gringotts officer. I will tell you, as will anyone here, that what you request cannot be done.”

“Do you know what company I keep?” she asked in a low, threatening tone.

“Indeed I do, Madam,” replied the goblin evenly. “But you must surely understand that were we to agree to your request, citizens would not keep their gold here, fearing that it could fall into other hands. Gringotts’ entire *raison d’être* would collapse, and we would be a bank no more. I regret that I cannot comply with your wishes.”

“You will regret it even more later,” she hissed. “What makes you think I will not kill you where you stand?”

“I cannot stop you,” he responded. “But if one Gringotts worker dies at human hands on these premises, automatic defenses go into effect. Barriers impervious to magic come down, and everyone is trapped. No one will be able to enter, or withdraw money, for quite a long time. Such a situation does not benefit the government, or humans in general.”

She turned on her heel and left; the goblin immediately called a meeting with other goblin leaders. “When Voldemort’s assistants took over the Ministry, we discussed certain enhancements for Gringotts’ defenses. I believe it is now time to act on those plans.” The humans, he vowed to himself, would never be allowed to take Gringotts by force.

Fortunately, Lestrangle did not return, and no one else attempted to make such demands. The goblin wondered whether what Lestrangle had done had been a deliberate bluff, just to see what the goblins would do, if they could be intimidated into turning over their enemies' money to them. Coming up empty, Voldemort obviously decided he preferred a functioning Gringotts to one that he controlled, but didn't function well.

For the next several months, life at Gringotts was as normal, except that the goblins had to put up with rudeness and arrogance not only whenever Death Eaters were their customers, but even from some Ministry workers who had never acted in such ways before. The natural human tendency coming out, thought the goblin leader.

Then came the day that would change his life forever. He was in his office when he heard the alarm indicating that someone had tried to infiltrate Gringotts by magical deception. He hurried to meet the bank officers; security personnel were already on their way down to intercept the intruders. They had almost reached the vault in question when they saw three young humans climb onto the dragon and fly away. One of them looked very familiar...

He met with the other leaders; the Dark Lord would have to be told what had happened. The Gringotts manager volunteered to go; he knew that the Dark Lord would be displeased, but all that had been stolen was a small golden cup. Having been quickly interrogated under goblin truth serum, the goblin who accompanied the humans stated that the cup was the humans' objective, but did not know why. No gold was taken, pointed out the manager. It will be all right.

The manager did not report back, but Gringotts was not told of his fate until the next day, when word was spreading with lightning speed around the wizarding world that Harry Potter had defeated the Dark Lord. A man from the Ministry, clearly in a good mood, visited Gringotts to tell them of the dead goblin who had been found in the place where the manager had gone. He related the news with unconcern, as if a dog had been found dead in the street. No, the goblin leader thought; humans show more emotion over a dead dog.

As he left, a special edition of the Prophet arrived, with the first accounts of Potter's victory. The goblin leader had never met Potter personally, or even seen a picture. He looked at the face on the front page... and saw not only the one who had ridden off on a Gringotts dragon yesterday, but also the face of Dennekin, the man who had treated goblins brutally and sadistically so many years ago. Green eyes, black hair. The very image.

As he saw the goblin's eyes burn with the fury never forgotten a century ago, Harry was stunned that the goblin thought that he was virtually Dennekin's twin. I look nothing like him, he thought. Just the hair and the eyes, and the rest is massively different. I look more like Ron than I do this guy. But then it occurred to him that to him, most goblins looked alike, and it might be the same for them with humans. Hair and eye color might be the only thing they look at to differentiate us. Bizarre, that he thinks I look like that Minister. But it explained a great deal.

He saw events from the succeeding days: the goblin's anger at being told of Kreacher's arrival and withdrawal only after it had happened, his order to tell the Prophet of Kreacher's visit, against the advice of other leaders, and the increasingly hard line he took, with not so much support from those beneath him, but enough not to be overruled. A goblin had died, and Potter was to blame.

An old friend who was not part of the leadership approached him one morning. "Are you sure that taking such a hard line is a good idea? This man is a hero to the humans. Going after him may be like attacking a protective bear's cub."

"He is a criminal."

"Not to them."

"I do not care what it is to them! He is a criminal! This is indisputable!"

"I know that, of course. This is about practicality."

The goblin leader's eyes flared. "My grandfather said that once, in dealing with humans. Less than a day later their leader, a man whose

face is indistinguishable from this Potter, humiliated and tortured him in ways I would not have been able to imagine. This is not about practicality! This is about pride! We will not accept the death of one of our own lying down, as we did then. We will not humble ourselves before the humans, as we did then. We will insist on what is due us; no more, no less. Some of the young ones say the humans are not our masters, that they can be our friends. They have not seen what I have seen. If the humans wish to be our friends, now is the time they can prove it.”

His old friend looked at him carefully. “Are you doing what is best for our society?”

“That depends on your definition of ‘best.’ If you believe it is best for us to be as slaves, to bow to humans in all things so that we can continue to live the comfortable life of a slave, then no. But if you believe that it is better to insist on equality, to take the humans who insist we are equal at their word, then yes. My way is best.”

A younger employee rushed into his office. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but Potter and Weasley are outside now, talking to those waiting. I asked them to come inside, but they made sport of my request, and refused.”

A wave of anger washed over the leader; Potter was deliberately mocking him, a criminal standing outside at the scene of the crime. He quickly folded a piece of paper and made it a Portkey. “Send this to him.”

The young goblin looked surprised, but did as he was told, and left. The older one’s friend looked at him carefully, with concern, but said nothing. Five minutes later, the young goblin reported that the Portkey had snared only the human Kassant.

“Have him interrogated,” instructed the goblin leader. “Use truth serum.”

“But we have no Veritaserum—“

“We will use our own,” said the goblin, ignoring the surprised expressions of both his friend and his subordinate. “No, never mind, I will do it myself. I have some questions for him.”

Questioning the human yielded no useful information. The goblin leader was frustrated to have had Potter so close to his grasp, only to be saved by his friend. He started thinking about ways to get Potter, and came up with one. There wasn't a high probability of success, and he would have to hire as mercenaries some of the very humans that had treated goblins badly recently. Well, one human is no better than another, he thought, and as long as we are paying them, we are their masters.

On the morning of the operation, some of the ruling circle met with him, hoping to persuade him to cancel the operation, warning him that once Potter was kidnapped, the humans would go berserk, and declare war on the goblins. They implored him to at least wait, and see what negotiation yielded. He refused, saying that the humans had already shown their disdain for negotiation. Only a unanimous vote of the ruling circle could stop the operation, but one of them—a close friend of the one who had been killed—supported the leader's actions. The operation would go forward.

The operation was successful; they had Potter. As expected, the humans reacted with outrage; Gringotts was closed down, for the protection of its employees. Interesting, thought the leader. A hundred years ago, they abduct one of us, for purposes of greed, and expect us to do nothing. But now, we abduct one of theirs, for perfectly valid and justifiable reasons, and they become filled with bloodlust. Do they not see the parallel? Of course not; their history does not record what happened accurately. Well, we are through accepting this double standard. We will do to him what we did to the one of our own who helped him: he will answer questions under truth serum, and stand trial for his actions. The humans would do no less if one of ours broke into the Ministry, stole something, and caused great damage and property loss.

Meeting the captive for the first time, he felt great satisfaction to be on the other end of things this time; he again marveled at the resemblance to the hated Dennekin. But to the goblin leader's

surprise, Potter not only refused to answer, but also held out against great pain until he somehow passed out. After several repetitions, the doctor who examined Potter could find no reason for the occurrence, but warned him that Potter could die if it continued. The leader was tempted to continue anyway, but reluctantly agreed; Potter had to stand trial, not die. An example had to be set.

As he questioned Potter, he found himself frequently surprised. Potter had nothing against goblins, and indeed thought of them as equals to humans and, of all things, house-elves. He had meant no offense to the goblin community by his actions; he had simply felt he had no choice. At the same time, the human was stunningly ignorant of goblins, and the humans' shameful history in dealing with them. And he was ignorant of the offense he had caused; to his limited way of thinking, his goal justified all he had done, including murder.

As the goblin expected, Potter refused to accept the goblins' rightful jurisdiction, even though he accepted all arguments that logically led to the conclusion that he should. No surprise; both humans and goblins were capable of stunning leaps of illogic in the name of self-preservation. Well, sleep deprivation would eventually cause him to accept what they told him to accept. It wouldn't be quick, but at least it wouldn't kill him.

After Potter's rescue, the goblin felt fury at the Aurors: justice had been wrested from his grasp by the same crimson-robed villains who had once subjected him to torture. He called an emergency meeting of the ruling circle.

"Will the subterranean habitat be ready in time?" he asked.

"It will have to be," said one. "Obviously, the more time we have, the better. We are working as hard as we can. As for the important aspects—the greenhouses and animal breeding farms—yes, they will be ready by the time the Aurors break through Gringotts' defenses."

The leader nodded. "Good. Send a message to the humans. Warn them that they are not to attempt to occupy Gringotts. That if they do, they will encounter many magical traps, and they will not succeed."

“You are trying to provoke them,” observed one.

“Must we do this?” asked another. “The situation may still be manageable. Now that they have rescued Potter, the humans may calm down. A negotiated settlement may still be possible—“

“And after all that has happened,” snapped the leader, “what conditions do you suppose they will try to impose on us? What humiliations will we be forced to accept, for the offense of attempting to exact justice when they have not?”

“We should at least try—“

“Do you want to be the one to leave Gringotts, to see if the ordinary human citizens will tear you limb from limb before you even have a chance to meet anyone from the Ministry?”

The goblin stared angrily at the leader, but said nothing. The leader nodded. “I thought not. In any case, the point of no return has been passed; humans would never bank at Gringotts again. No, we are committed to the path.”

Harry now saw the underground complex the goblins had referred to; it was astonishing. Several hundred feet underneath the surface of the English countryside, it was at least a square mile in size, with a spell cast on the fifty-foot-high ceiling to simulate a sun and sky. There were roads, shops and homes, farms and greenhouses, all of what one would expect to see in a city. He somehow knew that this had been at first an emergency habitat, existing for generations as a place of escape from human depredations, and had been expanded slowly over the years. The current leader, upon taking office, had escalated and upgraded construction to the point where it was nearly a fully operating city. Space would be tight at first, but further expansion and construction would continue. Raw materials were acquired by a Muggle company which was a front for goblins, paid for with gold saved from many years of Gringotts profits. If that ran out—and it would not for a long time—more gold could be acquired from the rental of goblin-made metalworks, production of which would of course continue. Goblins could finally live a comfortable and free life, no longer at the mercy of human whims.

Weeks went by. The leader was informed that the humans had finally come close to breaking through Gringotts' defenses; once through, no one would be able to leave. Evacuation was almost complete.

The leader informed the ruling circle that he would be staying behind. They implored him not to, but he would not be dissuaded. "I must confront the humans. I put us on this path, and I knew the consequences. I must see this through, and make certain all goes as it should."

"It will, even without your presence," argued one. "It is not necessary."

"I must be sure. Nothing is foolproof."

"You will not survive."

"I would not have long anyway," the leader pointed out. "No, this is what I must do. You would not understand. My memories, which have haunted me for all my life, must be put to rest. You must lead our new, free society."

A day later, from the control room in the deepest reaches of Gringotts, the leader watched as the last of his countrymen departed; he was the last one left. He watched the magical viewscreen. Three hours later, he saw Aurors finally break the defenses, and slowly, carefully, using frequent Reveal Magic spells, make their way into Gringotts, deeper and deeper...

* * * * *

The road stretched out in front of Harry as the images ceased. Why, Harry wondered, had the images stopped? Have we reached the present, is that's what's happening right now? Is that goblin going to let himself be captured, let his treatment be the proof of human cruelty? Or is he going to try to kill himself, somehow take a few Aurors with him? Harry knew that being very careful and using Reveal spells constantly, the Aurors were in no great danger. The lead Aurors, he had seen, were ensconced in goblin-made armor; even an undetected projectile trap such as had killed Kreacher would

do no good. No, he must be hoping for a public trial in the Wizengamot, where he would present his memories of what Dennekin had done.

After the previous set of images and memories, the ones about Luna's father, Harry had wondered whether the purpose of what he was seeing was to recognize his own mistakes. But now, he was sure he knew. It was partly that. The main point, however, was that he was seeing the history of people whose behavior he had questioned, who had done things he found strange (Ginny), annoying (Molly), unethical (Xenophilius), or bizarre and destructive (the goblin). It was about understanding why people did the things they did, how their history formed their character and pushed them to act in ways he found incomprehensible. But why have there been no real trials? Except for the hail at the beginning, nothing had been truly dangerous. The Japanese guy who wrote the account said—

He heard a loud roar behind him; he turned to see a group of perhaps ten Nundu; he had once seen a picture of one in a book. They were a hundred meters behind him, closing fast. Startled, he dashed ahead, knowing he could never outrun them. Thinking about what to do, knowing there was really nothing, he turned again... and there was nothing but an empty road behind him.

He sighed. "Okay, I get it," he shouted to no one in particular. "I'm happy it hasn't been any more dangerous than it is. I promise not to wonder about it any more." As expected, he got no response.

He thought again about the goblin who had abducted him. He didn't exactly feel sympathetic toward him, but perhaps less hostile. His actions had been extremely unproductive, but maybe, not for him. His pride, in who he was, in his grandfather, was taken away at a very early age. What if I had grown up with my family, and seen my father subjected to that kind of degradation, that humiliation? Would I go off the deep end, hold a grudge all my life, decide that no peace was ever possible? Like with Xenophilius, I have no idea. Is that the point? That I can't know what it's like for them? Does it make what they did right? Or, at least, understandable? I don't know.

One thing it does tell me, he thought, is that history is seriously lacking. Not just that I didn't know that information—I didn't even know the official account, not that that would have done me any good—but even if I had, if I had access to the basic facts, I wouldn't have learned a tenth of what I just did. How many leaders have done what Dennekin did, treated someone terribly just because they could? How many goblin rebellions were caused by the accumulation of a hundred slights, insults, and other cases of bad treatment? Had a goblin done something bad to Dennekin a long time ago, or was he just an awful person? Is this why wars happen again and again, because people can't forget or forgive what others did to them or someone they cared about?

A tall, fit black man in his early fifties climbed up the mountain, with a six-year-old boy at his side. "Grandpa, can we rest?" asked the boy, breathing heavily. "I'm tired."

"Not yet, Kingsley," the man said. "Soon. But for now, we keep moving forward. Keep moving forward."

The mountain wasn't a difficult one for climbers; it required no special equipment. The older man occasionally had to help his grandson up a slightly steep part, but offered no more help than was necessary.

"You..." The boy took a breath. "...always say that."

"Well, because it's true," responded his grandfather. "My father taught me that, and his father taught him. And your father would have taught you." Harry somehow knew that Kingsley's father had been an Auror, and had died in the line of duty at a young age. Kingsley had been two when he died.

"It's part of life, young man," he continued. "You've always got to keep moving forward. Because if you don't move forward, you're standing still."

"But why are we climbing the mountain?"

"You liked the idea when I told you."

“I didn’t know it would be so hard,” said the boy grumpily.

They came upon a large, flat rock, and the older man decided it was time for a rest. He looked into his grandson’s eyes. “The things that are most worth doing, are the hard things,” he said earnestly. “You find out what you can do, by doing hard things. The more hard things you can do, the more of everything you can do. And when you have a hard thing to do, and it’s not easy, what do you do?”

Kingsley looked up at his grandfather. “Keep moving forward.”

The man smiled, and patted his grandson gently on the back.

A few months later, his grandfather stopped his usual monthly visits to the Shacklebolt home. His mother uncomfortably explained that his grandfather had to move to a faraway place to do important work, and might not be able to visit for a long time. It wasn’t for four years, when Kingsley was about to go to Hogwarts, that she told him the truth—that his grandfather had been arrested for something he hadn’t done, convicted of assault and resisting arrest, and sent to Azkaban. He was angry at his mother for lying to him, and angry at society for locking up a good man in what everyone knew was a terrible hellhole.

As he grew up, he learned from his mother that according to the Ministry, his grandfather’s sentence had been extended for alleged bad behavior and additional crimes committed in Azkaban. His mother did what she could, but was blocked by bureaucracy. Kingsley had a more or less normal experience at Hogwarts, making friends and learning well, but the shadow of his grandfather’s incarceration always hovered over him. He felt guilty for living his life as usual, even though he knew his mother would have done something if it were possible to do anything.

Always a hard worker, Kingsley decided at age 14 to become an Auror, and focused all his energy toward that goal. He was accepted into the training program after Hogwarts, and after the three years it took to finish that, became a full-fledged Auror. He knew that he shouldn’t ask for special favors so soon after being accepted, but he made his situation known around the Aurors, and talked to the Head of the Auror Office, who promised to look into it. A surprise inspection

of Azkaban by Aurors revealed the bureaucrat's deception; he was fired. Kingsley's grandfather was released and given a settlement of ten thousand Galleons in compensation.

Kingsley wasn't able to visit for a week, and when he did, was shocked by what he saw. The man preferred to stay in dark rooms, reacting with panic and alarm when a light was turned on. He muttered to himself frequently, and was often unresponsive to attempts at communication. The psychologist the family had hired to help him told Kingsley that the situation was unlikely to change anytime soon. Perhaps slowly, through time.

"Is this common for people who've been in Azkaban?" he asked.

She shook her head sadly. "Yes, it is. It's a barbaric practice, if you ask me. Unless someone's committed the most hideous crime imaginable, they don't deserve what they get in there. Even worse when, in your grandfather's case, they shouldn't have been there in the first place. I'm very sorry, and I'll keep working with him, but it's just going to take time."

For the next month, Kingsley resisted the urge to find the bureaucrat's personal information, visit his home, and... every day, there was a different daydream, a different revenge fantasy. But he didn't; he knew right from wrong, and had had to pass well-crafted character tests to join the Aurors. Even if he could get away with it—which he might well be able to—it would be like failing one of the tests. Also, it wouldn't change what had happened. Still, he couldn't help feeling the urge.

As the years passed, Kingsley continued to visit his grandfather, whose condition changed very slowly, if at all. It was as if demons had taken up residence in his head, and wouldn't go away. For brief periods he was lucid, but they were never very long. Finally, a week before Kingsley's thirtieth birthday, his grandfather died. It was in the middle of the first struggle against Voldemort, so he couldn't take time off; he focused even harder on his job, which he knew would make his grandfather proud. Keep moving forward, he thought.

Harry saw scenes from many years later, the year that Voldemort controlled the Ministry, and the Aurors. Kingsley got news sometimes from Hestia and the other Aurors who had left to fight. Current Aurors kept in touch secretly with their old colleagues, and gossip flew. Some Aurors were being corrupted, and among the Aurors, it was well known who they were. Kingsley was glad he hadn't stayed.

After Potter, amazingly, defeated the Dark Lord, Kingsley was selected by the Council of Elders to be Minister, at least temporarily. In addition to his urgent task of rebuilding the government and getting rid of Dark influence in the Aurors and the Ministry, Kingsley had to think about how to handle Harry Potter. Potter was the hero of the moment, and could do a great deal to help rebuild wizarding society. He could speak publicly, let himself be celebrated and admired for his actions. He could tell the story of the past year; the story would be an inspiration to the citizenry, spurring them as well to do what they could to help society. He could talk to Ministry workers, persuade them to alter normal bureaucratic procedure to get society back on its feet faster. Most importantly, he could be a symbol of what was good in society, what society could be proud of.

But after the conversation at breakfast, Kingsley knew Potter would do none of those things; he had never had high hopes. He didn't know the details, but he knew that Potter must have had a hard year, culminating with—gossip at Hogwarts on the day of Voldemort's defeat had it—him deciding to give up his own life to save wizarding society. Potter was uncommunicative and somewhat withdrawn, clearly unhappy to have anything asked of him, no matter how benign. Kingsley couldn't blame him—it wasn't as though he hadn't done more than enough already—but still mourned the loss to society. An older, more mature man would probably put aside his discomfort and accept his fate, do what society needed him to do. But Potter was still only seventeen, and not very self-aware or self-reflective. He needed time, and Kingsley would give him that time.

In his first week as Minister, Kingsley slept an average of three hours per night. He plunged into the hard work, knowing that he was performing a valuable, indispensable service to society, one he might not get the chance to perform for long. When you have a chance to do this much good, he thought, you have to make the most of it.

But when the dementors attacked, he felt as though he'd been given another Auror character test. If he didn't allow the dementors to return to Azkaban, they would continue to terrorize the population; people wouldn't be able to move around outside at all, and they wouldn't stand for that for long. He would be signing the death warrant of his Ministership. But if he allowed them to return, he would be complicit in the slow terrorizing of countless people in the future, some innocent like his father, and like Sirius Black. It was a moral test, and he had to take a moral stand. He had to do what was right, even if it doomed his Ministership. He decided to confide in Potter and ask for his help, and Potter came through better than Kingsley had hoped, rousing the population to fight rather than complain. At least, for a while.

The Auror problem, however, was worse than he had thought. Fully a dozen Aurors, almost a third of their complement, were known to have been corrupted, and over a dozen others were suspected. He interviewed many, and many Aurors pointed fingers at each other, made accusations. A few, including Spencer, confessed what they had done and asked forgiveness, both professional and personal. The crisis was serious, partly because more than two dozen Dark wizards slipped through their fingers because corrupted Aurors allowed them to do so. The situation simply couldn't be allowed to continue, but there was nothing he could do: he couldn't fire Aurors, nor could Hestia. No one but an Auror Leader could.

He searched his mind for Auror Leader candidates, and kept coming back to one name. The problem was that the person who despite his age had the best chance of passing—he had, in essence, passed one of the tests already by walking into the forest—strongly desired nothing more than to be left alone. Here was another test: give Potter what he deserved, to the detriment of society, perhaps even the loss of lives? Or ask him to take the test, knowing full well that Potter couldn't know the emotional ramifications of what he would be walking into? Every Auror Leader in history had taken the test willingly, actively desiring to do so. Kingsley was genuinely torn. He told Hestia to give Potter the background on the Auror problem, to plant the seed for the future, in case Kingsley decided to ask. He hoped he wouldn't feel he had to.

At first the goblin problem was simply annoying, something to be put on the back burner while more important matters were dealt with. But Kingsley and his advisers were stunned when the goblins pressed the point so hard that it couldn't be ignored, but also so hard that they risked ruining their relationship with humans, a relationship that had had no major problems for the past hundred years. Finally, they kidnapped Harry, and in a way, that solved Kingsley's problem: they could no longer be dealt with. Gringotts would be seized, citizens' money recovered, and if the goblins were lucky none of them would be punished for their part in the kidnapping. He gave the command for the Aurors to start work on the complex magic webs that would seal off Gringotts from the outside, access denied to all but Aurors. He made sure Kreacher was provided with the drink that could save Harry if he called Kreacher.

A week later they rescued Harry, Kingsley leading the mission. As soon as Kreacher died, an airborne sedative was first sent through the magical portal, to knock out any goblins who might be in the room. Then Kingsley and the other trusted Aurors came through, encountered no resistance, and got Harry back to the Park. With difficulty, they Enervated him, and got him to provide memories of his incarceration. Kingsley quickly scanned them... and realized that he had been presented with perhaps the most difficult decision of his life, and not much time in which to make it.

The test for Auror Leader required that the subject be disoriented, outside his normal consciousness; this was necessary for the memory modifications to be done. And here was the very person who Kingsley needed to take this test, in the very condition in which he needed him. All he needed to do was put Harry in the magical field, and the ancient device would do the rest. It was all too easy; it was as if fate was saying, here, go ahead and do it. The good point was that he didn't have to risk Potter saying no to the test, as it seemed likely he would. The bad point was that whether Potter failed or succeeded, he would likely be furious at being given such a test without being consulted. Kingsley was sure he would be, in the same situation. But having corrupted Aurors operating damaged society in profound ways; it made it seem worth the risk. He tentatively decided to do it, but his conscience stung. He had seen in the memories that Harry

had behaved courageously and honorably in captivity, fighting harder than almost anyone would fight, on principle. Then I take advantage of his weakened condition to put him through an awful trial? He went back and forth, and finally decided: the needs of society had to come first. "I'm sorry, Harry," he muttered as he transferred Harry from the medical bay bed to the energy field that created the artificial reality Harry would be plunged into.

It was a day later; Kingsley was still in the room. He occasionally saw images, flashes, of what was happening. One such image showed Harry walking through a dark area, holding a flashlight. Soon after that, he saw Harry closing the lid on the vat. A few seconds later, a small orange ball fell out of the energy field; it looked like it was several even smaller ones stuck together. Kingsley made a fist and pumped it in triumph, but he didn't smile. He picked up the ball, put it into a small plastic bag, and into his pocket.

Harry watched the conversation he had with Kingsley when he came out of the device, but this time, from Kingsley's point of view, feeling what Kingsley felt. Kingsley tried to explain as much as possible before telling Harry that he had done this to him, because he knew that Harry would probably stop listening beyond that point. He hoped fervently that Harry wouldn't be as angry as he expected, but when Harry was, Kingsley wasn't surprised. He knew that he had to be braced for, and not interfere with, anything Harry might do in his anger, even if it was to go to the Prophet and torpedo his Ministership. This is the chance I took, he thought.

His conscience still plagued him, even though he knew he had done it for reasons that were good, right, and unselfish. He had risked his Ministership on this, which meant risking his great emotional cause—the dementors—as well: the next Minister would waste no time making the previous deal with the dementors, so he wanted to hang on as Minister if only so that didn't happen. But, hard as it was, he put the integrity of the Aurors and the good of society over his pet cause. But his conscience took another beating when Dumbledore and Hermione pointed out that Harry's terrible family life made losing his real parents that much worse; Kingsley hadn't thought of that, and kicked himself for not having done so. Would it have changed what I did? I don't know, he thought. Of course, Harry's right that I should

have asked him. He deserved that much. But sometimes, it isn't about what's right, but what leads to the best result. Or what, in a desperate situation, could lead to the best result. Anyway, what's done is done. I need to stop thinking about it. But, easier said than done.

Harry watched Kingsley tell the Weasleys, and his heart warmed at Ron's furious reaction. He knew Ron and Hermione would always do whatever it took to protect him. He saw Dudley ask about Harry's abilities, and so knew it was definitely true that he could know when someone was lying. He hadn't had the sense much in Japan; they tended to be evasive and indirect rather than lie.

Almost a month later, the next crisis happened: it was discovered that one of the Aurors who was putting up the magical web around Gringotts had been sabotaging the effort all along, and a month's effort went to waste: they had to start over. Kingsley had been constantly asked by the media for progress reports, and now had to decide how to explain the delay. Going public, unfortunately, was not an option; the only thing worse than having compromised Aurors was everyone knowing that there were compromised Aurors, which would undermine people's confidence in them, and cause even greater damage to society. So, lying became a regrettable necessity. Speculation abounded anyway, as many wizards and witches knew the spells involved, and knew how long they should take. Either incompetence or sabotage was suspected, and neither boded well for the Aurors' public image.

Kingsley considered how to prevent a recurrence. He was tempted to question all of the Aurors involved under Veritaserum, but the problem was that he'd have to give them Memory Charms—which were not 100% reliable—afterwards. There was a very small chance that his illegal actions could be discovered. Worse, if he did discover a saboteur, he couldn't even fire the person; sidelining them would be the most he could do. He thought darkly of arranging an 'accident,' but he knew he could never do it. He knew that the fact that he even had the thought was an indication of his stress and frustration. He wished Harry would come back; he could give Veritaserum and fire people. But he resisted the temptation to try to call Harry back. He

knew that if Harry was ever to be Auror Leader, even with another Minister, he had to be left alone now.

Kingsley decided to go about the Gringotts problem indirectly. He told the Aurors that because of what had happened, those who wanted to help put up the spells around Gringotts first had to answer questions under Veritaserum; the questions were given in advance, and any Auror who didn't want to answer the questions didn't have to. Only one of the Aurors who had worked on Gringotts refused to take the test, claiming that it was on principle. Some other Aurors protested that Kingsley was exceeding his authority as Minister, and threatened to take their protests public. Kingsley called their bluff, saying that as a matter of security it had to be done. It helped him that public surveys taken by his political people told him that his stance would be supported by the population. The recalcitrant Aurors backed off, but battle lines had been drawn.

Another month went by, during which time he started to come under increasing public pressure regarding the dementors; the protection Harry had given him before being kidnapped was evidently starting to wear off. Kingsley's supporters formed a group that called themselves No Surrender to Dementors, and tried to raise awareness of the effects of dementors, frequently invoking Harry's speech at the Merlin ceremony and his letter to the editor of the Prophet. Even so, many argued that wizards couldn't live under dementor threat indefinitely; something had to be done. Free from worry about a public rebuke from Harry, undersecretaries began to speak out against Kingsley.

When Kingsley first became Minister, he had wanted to stay as long as possible because he thought he could do a good job, but after the dementors started attacking, remaining as Minister took on a special importance to him: as long as he stayed Minister, the dementors stayed out of Azkaban, and that cause was as dear to him as any he could remember. He always saw his grandfather's face, knew how Azkaban has crushed his once indomitable will. It couldn't be allowed to happen to anyone else. He had to stay as Minister, if only for that reason.

Finally, the Gringotts work was completed; Gringotts was sealed off, even beneath the surface, to anyone but who the Aurors decided to

let in. Kingsley and Hestia decided to use all Aurors, even those suspected of disloyalty; they went in pairs, suspect Aurors paired with trusted ones. Hestia remained at the Gringotts entrance, staying in magical communication with all the Aurors. All were inside; none reported any magical traps other than the standard ones which were already known. Some Aurors were as deep as was possible; others were closer to the surface. All reported to Hestia that all was clear.

* * * * *

Harry now saw the goblin leader, in the deepest part of Gringotts, as he had seen him at the end of the previous vision. He closed his eyes for a minute, then opened them. "For you, grandfather," he said aloud, then pushed a button on a machine in front of him. He was incinerated in a flash of the brightest light Harry had ever seen.

* * * * *

The ground shook under Hestia's feet. Alarmed, she spoke into her communications device. "Kingsley, there's been an earthquake!"

In his office, Kingsley did a double-take. "What? Hestia, there are no earthquakes—"

"In England, I know," she responded. "But I felt it. It was pretty strong. I'm stepping inside the Gringotts lobby, and there's damage. The floor seems to have sunk in somewhat—"

Dread filled Kingsley as knowledge acquired from the Muggle world made him sickeningly sure that he knew what had happened. "Hestia, Disapparate out of there, right now."

"But Kingsley, we have to get teams in here, start digging—"

"I said, NOW!" he shouted. "I'll explain later, but right now, you're in great danger. Get out now. Do you understand?"

She sounded mystified and mildly annoyed. "Okay, okay. I can't Disapparate from here, but I'm heading for the entrance."

“Good. Disapparate as soon as you possibly can, and come to my office. You’ll be in charge of evacuating the area near Gringotts; no one is to be within a hundred meters of Gringotts until further notice. I’m setting up an emergency meeting with the Muggle Liaison Office.”

“What? Why?”

“I’ll explain later. Just do what I said.”

“Okay. Disapparating now.”

Harry saw Kingsley meeting with the Muggles who had been called in, guided through Diagon Alley, and would be given Memory Charms when this was all over. They confirmed his suspicion: a Muggle nuclear weapon had somehow been acquired by the goblins, and set off far underground when the Aurors were inside. Except for Hestia, the Aurors were all dead.

Kingsley had been sure he was right, but having it confirmed was the worst punch to the gut he’d ever had, and he’d had a few. Forty-one Aurors dead, on his watch... As if on automatic pilot, Kingsley went about his normal duties, but a part of him felt dead. He knew he wouldn’t be Minister for long, after this, but he didn’t care.

The wizarding public was outraged; many demanded retribution, even though no one knew where the goblins were. The next day’s Prophet was almost entirely about the ‘Gringotts Massacre,’ as the paper called it, but on the editorial page, the plaintive title of one editorial was, ‘Harry Potter, Where Are You?’ Reading it, Kingsley shook his head. They’d make him Minister now, he thought, if Harry would do it. They need someone to look to, someone to save them. What if I hadn’t done it? What if Harry was still here, hiding out in Grimmauld Place? What would he do now? Probably even he wouldn’t know. It would be crushing for him, the expectations and hopes that would be placed on him. Maybe it’s better that he’s out of the country. The next day, Sato met with him, but Kingsley still refused to call Harry back, or make him feel as though he should come back.

The Council of Elders summoned Kingsley two days later to tell him that the remainder of his Ministership was to be measured in days,

not weeks. They acknowledged that no Minister could have foreseen the Gringotts disaster, but that combined with the dementor situation had given people the feeling that Kingsley couldn't protect the population. The new Minister hadn't been decided yet, but it would be someone in whom the public had confidence, and probably someone who would be aggressive, or at least sound aggressive. In other words, thought Kingsley, a standard politician whose words bear little or no relationship to reality.

He spent the next day taking care of many things that needed to be done, including magical measures to get rid of residual radiation, and forming a group of Ministry workers, to be headed by Percy Weasley, whose part-time job was to be law enforcement, to combat the impression that with the Aurors gone, nothing and no one was safe. Anyone with an Outstanding N.E.W.T. in Defense Against the Dark Arts was eligible to join the group.

Kingsley, at the end of the day, leaned back in his comfortable chair in his office. How did this go so wrong so fast, he wondered. It's like the goblins just went bananas. Vigilante mobs are out looking for goblins, and I don't know whether to stop them or help them. Dementors will be back in Azkaban... He knew he hadn't been a bad Minister; he had just been very unlucky. Though he knew it was stupid, he wondered whether his fate was a karmic payback for what he had done to Harry. I had the best intentions, he thought. But maybe sometimes doing the right thing is best, even if it doesn't seem like it. Who knows. Soon I'll be an Auror again, doing what I know best. Actually, I won't really be being an Auror; Hestia and I will have to try to rebuild the Aurors. But will potential Aurors have any confidence in me, even as an Auror, given that I presided over this massacre? Would they be right not to? Kingsley had told himself the day before not to blame himself for the disaster—after all, no wizard would have considered the possibility of a nuclear weapon—but he found that it was easier said than done. Forty-one Aurors had died on his watch; that would stay with him for the rest of his life.

Keep moving forward, his grandfather's voice told him. But the man couldn't, after Azkaban. Kingsley wondered if he could, now. Some things were very hard to get past.

* * * * *

Images and thoughts faded, and the road was once again the only thing that Harry's senses registered. All the Aurors dead, he thought disbelievingly. Well, almost all. Good Lord. What if I had become Auror Leader when I passed the test? Would this have somehow happened differently? Seems unlikely; I don't see how. Would I have insisted on going in there first, and died? Or stayed outside Gringotts, calling the shots, and feeling responsible, like Kingsley does now? Definitely better that I left the country. Strange how fate works.

As he walked, the situation began to sink in for him. Considering that the Aurors had been decimated, it seemed almost unavoidable that he would have to come back and be Auror Leader. He was amazed that Kingsley had declined even to have Sato tell him. An overreaction to his previous mistake? Or just Kingsley throwing in the towel, figuring he'd let the next guy deal with it? Even though I saw and felt what he was going through, I'm not sure which it is. But now, not coming back would seem like a huge act of cowardice. But do I even want to, as opposed to feeling obliged to? I didn't ask to be Auror Leader, after all. So why should I feel obliged, when it was never something I asked for or wanted?

As with the others whose stories he'd now seen in great detail, he found his feelings toward Kingsley changing. He'd always felt that Kingsley's mistake had been not asking him, and he still felt that way. But his anger at Kingsley was fading. Partly because of what Kingsley was now going through, and partly because he now knew how difficult it had been for Kingsley to give him the test, and the forces that motivated him. Especially in that doing so had risked his Ministership, and with that, the chance of keeping the dementors out of Azkaban.

I guess this is consistent with the other things they showed me, he thought. Everyone had done things I thought they shouldn't do, or acted in ways I didn't understand, but now I understand. Not only them, but the big picture. None of us knows anyone else's story; even family or close friends, we can't know. What they do that's natural for them may seem strange to us, and vice versa. Did people think I was acting strangely when I didn't want to do anything? Of course, I

thought I was acting strangely too, so it's not the same thing. But nobody could know how I was feeling. I had died, after all, or at least it was as if I had... emotionally, probably the same thing, really...

A few memories flashed through his mind: Aberforth saying that walking to one's death would do something to a person, that there was more than what meets the eye... Gleason, saying that he was affected in ways that maybe even he didn't realize... I couldn't look at my future, couldn't face it...

Suddenly, he had an epiphany; he knew why he'd felt the way he had, from the morning he'd woken up after defeating Voldemort. I died, he thought. Not really, but in my mind, it was as if I had. In order for me to walk into that forest, I had to let go of all my hopes, dreams, and expectations of the future. I had to accept that I had no future, because I was going to die. I couldn't walk into the forest without doing that. I'd broken up with Ginny, this time for good, by dying. I felt like after I survived I should have been able to just pick up where I left off with her, but I couldn't. I had said goodbye to the world, and then when I came back, beyond beating Voldemort, I didn't know what to do. I'd separated myself from everything. I felt as though no one should expect anything of me, because I didn't expect anything of myself anymore. I had written it all off.

I just... needed time, to change my frame of mind from dead to living, and I wasn't even aware of it. Strange how I couldn't understand the others' behavior because I didn't know their history, but I also couldn't understand my own, even though I do know my own history. I suppose we don't look at ourselves the same way we look at others, the way I was able to look at Ginny, Xenophilius, and so on.

"Well done," a voice said.

Harry looked up and saw, right in front of him, the same blue, white, and translucent energy field he'd been in the center of when he'd just taken the Auror Leader test. But this time, there was a man sitting in the center of it. He had sandy blond hair and a few freckles, and an ordinary-looking face. He seemed like a kind, gentle person, both from his eyes and his face.

“Uh, thank you,” said Harry. “Who are you?”

The man shrugged. “That depends on how you look at it. In one sense, I’m a human named Jeffrey Anders. I was the thirteenth Auror Leader, and I died about two hundred years ago.

“But in a different sense, I’m the intelligence behind what you think of as these energy fields. I speak through this man partly because it’s more natural for you to speak to a human, and partly for symbolic reasons. In any case, congratulations. You’ve passed the trial; you’re finished.”

“The trial?” asked Harry, surprised. “Only one?”

Anders nodded. “I had a hard time with you. You noticed that this wasn’t very hard for you, and that’s true. But here was my problem: you were the first person ever to seek me out in the way most people do, for information, while having already seen me before, and having undergone trials that time—while not knowing that you already had.”

“You... and the one the Aurors have... are the same thing?”

“Yes, and no. The same thing, and part of the same thing. Normally, people don’t get two shots at this, but it wasn’t fair to not allow you, since you didn’t know that you’d seen me before. And, as you said to the Japanese Culture Minister, your heart was pure; what you seek is not something for your own benefit. So, I let you in. But, what trials could I give you? You’d already passed the hardest trials a human can do, not only in the Auror Leader test, but in real life as well. There was no question of your worthiness. So, I made up one trial: to get what you came for, you had to understand the reason that you felt the way you did after beating Voldemort. I was going to give you one more series of visions: of yourself, selected to give you hints. But you figured it out, so that wasn’t necessary.

“The other things weren’t really trials so much as education. I think it helped you to see what you saw, and the dueling and the chess were a lot like training. If they were trials at all, it was in the sense of requiring patience, which has never been your strong point. But you make up for it with stubbornness, so you did well.”

“The dueling,” said Harry, “I understand, because that’s useful for an Auror, and maybe Auror Leader especially. But why chess? It doesn’t seem that important.”

The man sounded disappointed. “Harry, you should be able to guess. Take some time, think about it. Let’s see if you can’t come up with the answer.”

Mildly annoyed at being given another riddle after being told he’d finished, he sat on the road and thought. After several minutes, he said, “Is it because strategy is important, both in chess and real life?”

“Not exactly, but you’re on the right track. Have another go.”

A few more minutes later, Harry was sufficiently convinced he had it that he stood. “In chess, you need to look at the whole board, and see three, four, five moves ahead. Being Auror Leader, trying to fight bad guys, you also have to look ahead farther than they do.”

“Very good, that’s it,” agreed Anders. “It’s a way of thinking, a habit that should serve you well.”

“So, why were you chosen for this? I assume not everyone who comes this way sees you at the end, that it’s just for me because I pass—I mean, because I’m Auror Leader.”

With a small grin, Anders said, “You were going to say, because you passed, deliberately hedging on committing that you were Auror Leader. That was an unconscious habit, a reluctance to commit to that. But anyway, yes, I was chosen specifically for you.”

“So, were you, like, the greatest Auror Leader?” guessed Harry.

Anders chuckled, but it seemed more ironic than humorous. “No, Harry. It’s because I was the worst one. I said before that I was the thirteenth one, but history doesn’t even record me, because most people didn’t know about me.”

Harry frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“As well you wouldn’t. By way of background, I’ll explain that there are twelve of these, what you call energy fields, each with a kind of consciousness, though not an ego as you think of it. As I suggested before, it’s like they’re separate but together at the same time. Spread out all over the Earth, they’re points at which magic is strongest nearby, and they’re also a sort of dimensional link, places where multiple dimensions overlap. That’s why you’re able to see and experience a dimension similar to yours, but in which your parents were alive. It’s a potential reality, actualized for a short time by the energy here.

“The one in England has been used for the purpose of finding an Auror Leader for a very long time; the intelligence allows itself to be used in such a way because it finds the reason worthy. Anyone who tries to use it for selfish reasons will find himself rejected. Some people try to take the test for Auror Leader, for example, and I—the intelligence—reject them summarily, don’t even give them a chance to try, because I know what their reasons are, and they’re not good.

“Which is where I—Jeffrey Anders—come in. You see, once you’re chosen as Auror Leader, you have control over the field to a certain extent. You can ask it to employ a certain scenario, and it will. A few Auror Leaders have used it in such a way, for training purposes. Others have used it for less noble, but still reasonable, purposes. One discovered that by using it to view past events, he could exert considerable sway over the Council of Elders; though only portraits, they don’t want their reputations damaged, and they all have things in their past that they don’t want known.

“I passed the Auror Leader test, and what Auror history records is that five days later, I was found dead. Suicide.”

“Why?” asked Harry, amazed.

“My earlier life had been tragic in several ways; a little like yours, but even more so. Passing the test took even more out of me than it did you; at first I was furious, feeling it a barbaric test. But I discovered I had the power to set this field for various scenarios, and... what do you suppose I did?”

Harry suddenly understood. "Lived the life you wanted to have, rather than the one you did have."

"Very good; you understood that better than most would have. Yes, that, and then some." Solemnly, he said, "I lived five lifetimes in this, each a different, but good one. After what to me was three hundred-plus years of living, I decided I'd had enough, and the real life was bound to be bad compared to the ones I'd already had. So, I decided to just end it. I had taken a privilege I'd earned, but earning it damaged me psychologically, and I ended up abusing it. I'd never been announced to the country as Auror Leader, and the Aurors weren't about to do it posthumously. I'm now only in Auror history, the secret scrolls only to be read by other Auror Leaders. I'm a warning of what not to do."

"And you appeared to me," said Harry, "because you think I might be tempted to do the same thing."

"You wouldn't be human if you weren't," said Anders kindly. "But yes, my presence does emphasize the point."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I get it. It is tempting, to have that life, the one I had before I had to give it up. But, no, I won't be doing that. I'll just have to settle for the real one."

"So, you seem to have accepted that you'll be Auror Leader. I'm curious as to why. Even though you now understand why you didn't want to commit to anything, it doesn't necessarily follow that you'll be Auror Leader."

"Yeah, that's true," Harry admitted. "And there's still a part of me that doesn't want to do it, the part that wants to hide in Grimmauld Place all day. But I need to stop doing that, I need to get out there and live my life. I would've had to do that anyway, at some point. As for Auror Leader..." He thought for a minute.

"I'm not sure. I think that combined with all the stuff I learned in here, being in Japan had some influence. I wouldn't want to live in their society, but it has some good points, and one of them is that

everyone thinks about what's good for society in general. That shouldn't come before what one person wants, but we should probably think about it more. I had wanted to be an Auror anyway, and... Kingsley knew this, and he was right: there's a lot of good I can do. I wanted that quiet life where I could do something I wanted every day, be left alone, just be nice and relaxed. But now, I would feel guilty if I did that. That's just not in the cards for me. I've kind of accepted that."

Anders nodded. "It's very good of you, as the Japanese would say. It's better than I did. Of course, I didn't have the benefit of seeing the kinds of things you saw, and my early life was worse. So, even though by Auror Leader standards I failed most miserably, I hope you'll remember me with compassion."

"I will."

"Thank you. Now, one more thing: you were told that I ask something of everyone who makes it this far. In your case, what I want is... your story. I want some who quest to be able to come away with the story of what happened to you, from when you were a baby until now."

Harry frowned. "But you could do that anyway."

"True, but we usually get the permission from the one of whom the story is told. Those who earn the right to see it will know your actions, your thoughts, your feelings, at key points in your life; even your King's Cross meeting with Dumbledore. We ask because it is something of an invasion of privacy. The things you saw in here were rare exceptions, mainly because as Auror Leader, you have access to this kind of thing. Also, my request is somewhat symbolic, since you have strongly resisted telling your story."

"Okay, you have my permission. But why is my story so important?"

"Stories can inspire, Harry," explained Anders. "They can show the way to do the right thing, or in the cases you saw, show how to avoid the wrong thing, or give insight into others. Your story is, as Aberforth said, the granddaddy of them all. It would inspire many who knew it, as it does your countrymen even though they don't know all of it."

“Now, I can save you some time and difficulty getting back; I can send you to the part of myself that the Auror compound is built around. You can Apparate anywhere you want from there.”

“That’s good; I’d rather not sit on another plane for twelve hours.” As he spoke, his surroundings instantly changed, and while it appeared that the energy field hadn’t moved at all relative to his position, he was in the room in which he’d woken from his Auror Leader test. “But wait a minute, Kingsley said you couldn’t Apparate from this room.”

Anders was gone, but his voice came from the energy field. “You will find that you can Apparate anywhere in England, even where others cannot; it is one of the enhancements of being Auror Leader. Good luck.”

“Thanks. Oh, wait a minute! What about what I came here for?”

“You already have it; it is now in your mind.”

Harry searched his memory, and indeed, something was there that hadn’t been there before. Ingenious, he thought admiringly. “This spell... almost seems Japanese. Was it?”

“I’m not going to tell you everything,” said the energy field, still speaking in Anders’ voice. “You have to find out some things for yourself. I’m not an oracle, after all.”

Harry chuckled. “Just seems like it. Okay, thanks.” He looked around the room, and again saw the glowing doorway, the one he knew now was for him and him alone. It would have to wait, however. There were things to do.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 21, The Auror Leader: Back in England after three months away, Harry finds that Kingsley’s tenure as Minister has almost come to an end, meaning that the dementors will soon be back in Azkaban.

From Chapter 21: "It might be better to delay this while more time can be taken to come up with a less risky plan," countered McGonagall.

Harry shook his head. "This event has already been set in motion; I can't change it, and another one wouldn't work the same way. It has to be now."

"You are asking people to unknowingly risk their lives!"

"I don't see where that's your business, Professor," he said levelly.

Chapter 21

The Auror Leader

He Disapparated, and was suddenly in his bedroom at Grimmauld Place. Looking around, he realized that he felt very different than he had the last time he was there. He associated the place with a feeling of restriction, of wanting to hide, to be left alone. I'm going to have to get a new place, he thought. Definitely build something in Godric's Hollow, maybe on the same land as my parents. I'll have to look at plans when I get some free time, but I'm going to be pretty busy for a while.

"Ron!" he heard Hermione shout from downstairs. "I asked you a question!"

He smiled; this was going to be fun. He started downstairs.

"What?" shouted Ron from the living room.

"I told you, I'm making some lunch!" she shouted. "Am I making it for one, or two?"

Harry reached the bottom of the stairs, visible from both the kitchen and the living room. "How about for three?"

There was silence for a long second as they both stared at him. Hermione let out a high-pitched squeal and ran to him, throwing her arms around him and holding him tightly. "Harry!" As he hugged her, he grinned at Ron over her shoulder; Ron grinned back. Separating from Hermione, he then hugged Ron.

"Oh, Harry, we missed you so much!" exclaimed Hermione. "Are you back?"

Even though he knew what she meant, he raised his eyebrows, pretending he didn't. "I seem to be."

"You know what I mean. Are you done traveling, you're back for good?"

"I'm back for good," he assured her. "No more traveling."

"It's good to see you, mate," said Ron. His tone becoming more solemn, he asked, "Does this mean you're going to be..."

Harry nodded. "Auror Leader. Yes, I am."

Even more solemn, Ron nodded. "Half of me wants to congratulate you, and half wants to say I'm sorry for you. I assume you know what happened at Gringotts. You've got quite a job ahead of you."

"That's true," agreed Harry. "And that's why, as always, I need your help. Both of you. I have to build a new group of Aurors, and you two are the first people I want with me."

"Both of us?" asked Hermione, surprised. "Me, too?"

"You, too," Harry affirmed. "I know it's something you never wanted to do. I'm not asking you to make a career commitment. If you do, that's great. But at least, I want you until I can get the Aurors' numbers up to a reasonable level, and that could take a few years. I need your help, both of you."

"I'm in," agreed Ron.

Hermione hesitated, then nodded. "I didn't know what I wanted to do; I would have never chosen being an Auror. But I know you didn't choose Auror Leader, either, and you're doing it because we need you. So yes, I'll do it. I'll consider whether I want to leave or not when the numbers are okay. You know, Harry, we can't say no to you."

He exhaled; he hadn't consciously realized how important it was to have them with him. "Thank you both, really. It means a lot to me. Now, this hadn't occurred to me until now, but I'm really hungry."

Hermione smiled. "Coming right up. As long as you tell us about what happened while I'm making the food." Harry and Ron sat at the kitchen table as Hermione prepared lunch, and Harry started talking.

Thirty minutes later, Harry finished his food, having taken longer than them because he had talked a lot while eating. “So, what’s the situation here right now? What’s Kingsley doing?”

Ron looked grim. “He told Dad, very confidentially—Weasleys only—that the Council has told him he’s gone, and that it’ll happen tomorrow. He’s scheduled an event in Diagon Alley, his resignation speech.”

“Okay, that’s the first order of business,” said Harry. “Now that I have some food, I can get started. I have some things to do this afternoon—this is Sunday, right?” They nodded. “Okay. I’ll be needing your help later, maybe in an hour or two. I’m not sure how long this is going to take.

“I have a question before I go, and it may sound strange, but it’s very serious. Do either of you have any problem with Neville?”

Surprised, they glanced at each other. They shook their heads.

“You like him, you trust him?” Harry pressed them. “You would put your life in his hands?”

More confused, they again nodded. “What’s this about?” asked Ron.

“It has to do with why I did that oracle thing,” said Harry. “I’ll explain more later—“

“What do you mean, ‘more’?” Ron asked sarcastically.

Harry grinned. “Ah, sarcasm. It’s good to be back. I really will tell you later, not too long from now. But I have a few errands first, and it seems there’s no time to lose.” He stood and Disapparated.

Knowing the location of the place because of the memories he’d seen, he Apparated into the small but ornate room which contained the five portraits comprising the Council of Elders. They gaped at him; he acted normally. “Good afternoon, gentlemen. I’m Harry Potter.”

“This room is immune to Apparition and Disapparation!” said one, sounding offended.

“Ah, I didn’t know that,” said Harry. Not surprising, he reflected. “I suppose I should also explain that I’m now Auror Leader. The ceremony announcing it will be tomorrow. I’d appreciate it if you’d keep it under your hats for now.”

The men looked even more astonished. “When did this happen?”

“Recently,” answered Harry. “I’d like to...” He almost said, ‘ask a favor,’ but he didn’t want them thinking he owed them something. “...request that you rescind your intention to get rid of Kingsley. I want him to remain as Minister.”

“Oh, you do, do you,” remarked the one in the lower left, with understated sarcasm. “And why is that?”

“I’m going to have a hard job ahead of me,” said Harry. “I need a Minister who’ll give me his full cooperation, and not play political games with me, like, I’ll do this for you if you do that for me. I don’t have time for that. Also, Kingsley will do better for the people than anyone else you could name.”

“He has not, so far,” said the same one.

“The same things would have happened no matter who was Minister—“

“You do not know that.”

“He made no poor decisions—“

“The dementors—“

“I agreed with that decision. I know it asks something of society—“

“It asks too much! The people have shown that they’ve had enough!”

“Of course, we take seriously the wishes of the Auror Leader,” said another. “Especially one so revered as you. But it is not as simple as you asking us to do something and us doing it. We are sworn to do what we think is right for society, and what the political circumstances demand.”

“The political circumstances will be changing,” said Harry confidently. “Tell you what. I’ll come back in a week, and we’ll talk again. In the meantime, I’d like your promise that you’ll do nothing without consulting me.”

Four looked agreeable, but the one in the lower left looked very offended. “We are not your puppets, for you to make demands of. What makes you think you have the authority to treat us as your servants?”

Harry hadn’t looked closely at their faces. He stepped forward and looked at the man. There should be plaques with names, thought Harry. “Are you Minister Dennekin?”

“That’s right,” the man said indignantly. “What of it?”

Harry stared at the portrait, trying to decide how strongly to assert himself. “William, trust me, you do not want to make an enemy of the Auror Leader,” said the first one Harry had talked to.

Ah, thought Harry. Speaking to the one who had just spoken, he said, “He doesn’t know what I can do?”

The portrait’s occupant shook his head. “There has only been one Auror Leader since he arrived, and that one had no particular political preferences.”

Harry nodded, still speaking to that one. “Please understand, I don’t want to cause you any trouble. It’s just that the situation now is really difficult, and I don’t need any more headaches than I’m going to have already. I really need Kingsley to stay.”

“We understand your wishes,” the man assured him. “We—“

"Well, I don't!" interjected Dennekin.

"—will do nothing without talking to you first. And we will explain the situation to our esteemed colleague."

Harry grinned at the man's wry humor. "I appreciate that. I'm looking forward to getting to know all of you."

"That's what we're afraid of," joked another.

Harry chuckled, as did two of the other portraits. "That wasn't what I meant."

"I know," said the man. "But as the others know, I hate to pass up the opportunity for a joke. There is so little humor here."

"I can imagine," agreed Harry. "Thank you for your time." Next stop, Hogwarts, he thought as he Disapparated.

Enjoying the ability to do so, he Apparated into the headmistress's office, in front of the large desk. He didn't necessarily think she'd be there on a Sunday afternoon, but she was. Head down, writing on parchment, she looked up at the Apparition sound, and did a startled double-take on seeing Harry standing in front of her. "Potter?" she gasped.

"Hello, Professor," he said. "Sorry to just barge in on you like this, but I'm in kind of a hurry."

She stood, staring at him, still shocked. "How did you do that? Is there some problem with the school's Apparition suppression? Or is it the Elder Wand?"

"Neither," he responded. "Well, for all I know, the Elder Wand might have been able to do it. Anyway, Professor, I need to see Neville."

She eyed him suspiciously. "You have not decided that you want the job after all, have you?"

Puzzled, he frowned. "No, I don't. And what does Neville have to do with that?"

"Professor Longbottom is now teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts."

Harry grinned. "Really? Well, good for him. He's a good choice. But anyway, I need to see him. Like, right away."

"Mr. Potter," she said sternly, "However you did it, one does not simply Apparate into the headmistress's office and demand to see this or that teacher. If you will tell me what your business is, I will deal with your request."

"Professor," he said calmly. "Please do a Reveal Magic spell on my forehead."

She looked at him as though he'd taken leave of his senses, then did as he asked. She clearly recognized the symbol; she was flabbergasted. He'd never seen her look anywhere near that surprised. "Auror Leader... but how?"

"By passing the test," he said quietly. He gave her another few seconds to recover, then said it again. "Professor... I need to see Neville, and I need him to come with me. I need his help with something."

Still staring at him, she walked to the door and left the office. He looked at the portraits for the first time, naturally focusing on Dumbledore's. "Hello, Albus."

"Hello, Harry," Dumbledore responded genially. "I see that you are back for good, as you are identifying yourself by your title."

He nodded. "I just had to work out a few things. It seems I got back just in time."

"It would seem so. Have you talked to the Council?"

"I just finished. They're going to hold off for a while."

“Good. You have a daunting task ahead of you, but there is no one in whom I would have more confidence to manage it.”

“Thank you, Albus. That means a lot to me.”

“How was Japan?”

“Strange. Interesting. Good. It was good to see things in another way. Learning about their culture made me see ours in a different way.”

“That’s good, Harry. I’m glad you had the chance to do so. I know you will be having precious little free time, but I hope that one evening at home you will tell me a few stories.”

“Of course, I’d be happy to,” he said.

“Good. Oh, I believe the headmistress is returning.”

Harry looked at the door, and sure enough, McGonagall entered, followed by Neville, who looked surprised and pleased. “Harry! You’re back!”

Grinning, Harry clasped Neville’s shoulder. “It’s good to see you, Neville. You look good. Look, I’m here because there’s something I need you to do. Can you come with me, right now?”

Neville looked at McGonagall, a ‘what’s this about?’ expression on his face. “Professor Longbottom, you will never be able to look at Mr. Potter in quite the same way again, after...” She did the Reveal Magic spell. Neville had roughly the same reaction McGonagall had had; clearly, he knew enough about Auror lore to recognize the symbol. “Merlin’s beard,” he whispered, awed.

Not sure what to say, he knew he had to give Neville a few seconds to get used to it. “How long will this take?” asked McGonagall.

“I’m not sure,” said Harry. “Maybe a few hours. I also might need him tomorrow. Before noon, I think.”

“He has classes, Mr. Potter.”

“If this goes as I think it will, it’ll be more important than his classes. Far more important. Also, tomorrow, I may need a few other people, D.A. people. Ginny, Corner, Zacharias, Luna...”

“Miss Lovegood is not at Hogwarts,” said McGonagall. “Her father passed away last week. She is on bereavement leave; we are not sure when she will be back.”

“I understand,” said Harry. “I’ll talk to her later. Neville, are you ready?”

“Yeah, okay,” said Neville, calming down slightly. “What are we doing?”

“Something very useful,” said Harry. “I hope, anyway. Let’s go.” He hooked his arm around Neville’s.

Startled, Neville pulled away. “That’s not going to work.”

Harry smiled. “Some things have changed.” He grabbed Neville’s arm and Disapparated.

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes later, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville took the Portkey in Harry’s bedroom, and they suddenly appeared in Kingsley’s office. Working at his desk, head down much like McGonagall’s had been, he didn’t hear them arrive. “Kingsley,” said Harry.

Kingsley looked up, and it was as if he saw a ghost. “Harry...”

Harry decided to leave any personal conversations for later. “Ron tells me that there’s a room in the Ministry that has a dementor trapped in it, but he’s not sure which one it is. We need you to take us there.”

Kingsley was still staring; Harry wasn't sure whether he'd been heard or not. Finally, Kingsley recovered. "Yes, it's a meeting room near where Umbridge had been interrogating Muggle-borns. There's three in there, actually. Someone had herded them in there after Voldemort died, and no one wants to deal with them. So, they've just remained there. No one will open the door."

"Well, we're going to open it. Come on."

"I can just tell you where to go..."

"No, you need to come too." Harry gestured towards the door with his wand. Still looking at Harry strangely, Kingsley led them out.

They saw almost no one in the halls, as it was a Sunday. It took less than two minutes to get there, by elevator and walking. They entered the large hearing room; Kingsley gestured to the meeting room door. "Ready?" asked Harry. Ron, Hermione, and Neville nodded. They formed a semicircle, and held one of their hands out toward the center. As they'd practiced at Grimmauld Place, the four held hands in such a way that each person's hand was touching the hand of all others; this, Harry had been told, was essential.

Harry swung the door open. Nothing happened for a minute, then a dementor came drifting out. Harry quickly closed the door, and the four activated their Patronuses. They directed them at the dementor, the four Patronuses coming at the dementor from all sides. The dementor tried to slide away, but the four Patronuses followed it, seeking to box it in. Harry's stag, Hermione's otter, and Ron's terrier forming three sides of a pyramid, with Neville's bear comprising the bottom. A part of each Patronus touched a part of every other one at the edges of the pyramid. Harry's stag melded with Ron's terrier and Hermione's otter; the top part of the pyramid was solid. The dementor thrashed around, but couldn't escape at the top. Neville's bear formed a solid link with the otter and the terrier, but a gap kept opening between the stag and the bear. It tried to close, but kept coming open. Finally, its thrashing increasing, the dementor pushed its way through the opening, and flew free, moving faster than Harry had ever seen a dementor move. Harry disengaged his hand from the others' and they all let go.

“Ron, Hermione, would you put it back in the room, please,” asked Harry. “Neville, could you come with me for a minute?”

They stepped out into the empty hallway. “Neville, you and I seem to have a problem.”

“What do you mean?” asked Neville. He seemed a bit nervous, but Harry wasn’t sure.

“The spell only works,” explained Harry, “when all four of the people have a close relationship. They care about each other, trust each other, feel close to each other. That’s what causes the sides of the pyramid to seal, seamlessly. Every side sealed except the side that connected our Patronuses. So, there must be some problem. We need to find out what it is.”

Neville looked at Harry, then looked away, now definitely nervous. Harry decided to venture a guess. “Is it Ginny?”

Very surprised, Neville looked at him. “What have you heard?”

“Nothing. No one told me anything. But when I did what I did to get this information, I had visions, visions that I know were accurate. One of them was of you and Ginny, hiding from Filch in a closet.” Neville gaped. “Another was her asking you to the end-of-the-year party.”

Still silent, Neville appeared not to know what to say. Harry spoke again. “Neville, look... I don’t have any hold on Ginny. She was right; I never made anything clear, mainly because I didn’t know what I felt. I broke up with her a year ago, and never gave her any reason to think that had changed. She was more than free to do whatever she wanted. I didn’t do anything, and she felt she couldn’t wait forever. So, that was that.”

Neville was finally able to speak. “You... really had visions?”

Harry nodded. “You had liked her ever since the Yule Ball.” Neville’s stunned surprise would have confirmed that Harry was right even if he hadn’t already been sure.

“Neville... if you and her weren’t together right now, I’m not sure what I would have done. Maybe I would’ve looked her up, and maybe I wouldn’t.” Harry knew he was playing with words a bit, that it was much more likely that he would’ve than that he wouldn’t have. But he didn’t want Neville to feel bad. “But you and her are together now, and I have no intention of trying to get between that. You’re happy, and she’s happy. You are happy, right?” Neville nodded. “So, that’s fine,” said Harry. “But it doesn’t affect you and me, as far as I’m concerned. I’ve known you for seven years. We’re good friends, I care about you, I trust you. This has nothing to do with that.” After another silence, Harry sighed. “Neville, could you say something, help me out here?”

Neville gave him an embarrassed grin. “Sorry. Harry, I... it’s very hard to know what to say. I feel like I snatched her away from you—“

“You didn’t. She said that, too. She didn’t want you to think like that.”

Neville nodded, still seemingly unnerved that Harry knew so much. “I know. It’s just hard not to. And now, here you are, Auror Leader, and I’m the one that waltzed away with your girlfriend while you were fighting Voldemort, then dealing with major issues. I thought it was really understandable that you didn’t know what you wanted for a while.”

“I know, you told her that. She was annoyed at you, she didn’t want you thinking like that. Neither do I.”

“But you did all that for us! Fighting Voldemort, breaking into Gringotts which led them to kidnap you, then leaving the country, which was also really understandable—all that happened because you were trying to help us! I just... felt really guilty about it. I mean, I like her a lot, I love to be with her. It’s just hard not to feel bad about it where you’re concerned, like I... took something away from you.” Neville sounded miserable, his tone one of someone confessing his most embarrassing secret.

Harry was trying to be noble, but it was difficult. He still liked Ginny, and didn’t know that there couldn’t have been a future for them.

Some part of him mourned for what could have been, but he had to deal with the here and now, and what they were trying to do. He hadn't known that Neville felt this way. He tried to put himself in Neville's shoes, and he could understand, at least a little. "You didn't, Neville. If you took something, I left it there to be taken. And she's a person, she can make up her own mind. There was a long history of me disappointing her. She approached you about the party, not the other way around. So, you have nothing to feel bad about. C'mon, Neville. You know I'm right."

Neville stared past Harry. "In a way, yes, I know. But sometimes your feelings are different from what you know is right. Do you know what I mean?"

Harry chuckled. "Oh, yes. Definitely. But in this case, it's... it was just circumstances, things kept not coming together. But this was between me and her, and now between you and her. Not between you and me. Okay?"

Neville nodded. "Okay. Thank you, Harry. This had really been bothering me. And I hadn't been telling Ginny about it, because I knew what she would say. But... you're being really good about it. I'm surprised, to be honest."

Harry shrugged. "It's the visions. They made me see a lot of things in a different way, understand things I hadn't understood. Anyway, let's go back, let's do what we came here to do." Patting each other on the back, they went back into the room.

They took up position again, all four hands interlocked; Ron opened the door, another dementor came out, then he closed it. They did their Patronuses, easily encasing the slowly moving dementor. Harry focused on placing his Patronus perfectly, and merging his Patronus with the sides of the others', especially Neville's. Again, the dementor started whirling around, in great discomfort... the seals on Harry's connections with Ron's and Hermione's Patronuses were solid, as were Neville's with theirs... and after an agonizing few seconds in which Harry's connection with Neville wavered, they melded together, sealing tight. The whirling dementor began to emit what sounded like a loud moan, getting louder... then suddenly, there was a very loud

pop, followed by a soft whooshing sound. A little debris that looked like ashes fell as the Patronuses faded into nothingness.

Ron and Hermione cheered; Kingsley looked stunned. Harry and Neville turned to each other, smiled, and hugged. Happy and excited, Neville suddenly hugged Ron and Hermione as well. Harry looked at Kingsley; a tear was running down Kingsley's cheek. He didn't wipe it away. "Thank you," he said to Harry, who nodded in acknowledgment.

"Wow," said Ron. "That was extra cool. So, what do we do now?"

"The other two?" suggested Neville. Harry agreed, and it only took a few minutes.

"How is it nobody knew dementors could be killed?" wondered Hermione. "I mean, Aurors went all over the world asking."

"I got this spell from... a kind of mystical source, I guess you could say," said Harry. "I don't know where it was originally from. It feels like a Japanese spell. But the Japanese had barely even heard of dementors. What I'd guess is that a thousand or so years ago, they had them, but someone came up with this spell, and it drove them away. They didn't record the spell, or did and it got lost, or something. Luckily for me, one Japanese guy found an account of the mystical source, and I was able to go and find it."

"Lucky for all of us," said Kingsley quietly. Harry still had mixed feelings about Kingsley, but was happy for him that his long-cherished goal would finally happen.

"Okay, so I'll ask again," said Ron, "What do we do now?"

Harry turned to Kingsley. "You were going to give a speech tomorrow, right? In Diagon Alley?"

Kingsley nodded. "This comes too late to help me, but it really takes the sting out of what happens tomorrow. I can leave with fewer regrets."

“Well, sorry, but you’re not done yet,” said Harry. “You’re going to change the plan a little bit. Here’s what I want you to do...”

* * * * *

Harry spent the next two hours in Diagon Alley, going to the most popular shops, letting himself be seen and talked to. He told people that he’d be giving a speech the next day at a few minutes after noon, the timing chosen so that people could come during their lunch hour. The news spread so fast that by the time he left, most of the people he ran into already knew about his plans. Lastly, he visited Flourish and Blotts and talked to his Wizengamot colleague. He asked for whatever books they had on the subject of Auror Leader. Clearly intrigued by the request, Flourish rounded them up immediately. He tried to give them to Harry for free, but Harry insisted on paying, explaining that he didn’t want to get into the habit of not paying for things. Flourish asked confidentially if there was a reason Harry wanted those particular books. Harry gave him a knowing smile, and suggested that he close the shop at noon so his employees could attend his speech. Harry knew, of course, that Flourish would feel free to spread the word, since Harry hadn’t officially told him anything. Harry wanted as many people as possible in Diagon Alley tomorrow at noon.

He Apparated straight to his bedroom and thought about what to do next. He knew he should make an appearance at the Burrow, but he wanted to make sure he had nothing else pressing to do. He considered the plan for the next day, then over the next few days. Like Anders said, he thought, you have to look ahead. He knew what he would do next, but decided to look at the mail first.

He scanned everything, dividing it into piles of fan mail and mail he knew he would need to look at. Seeing one from Luna, he opened it immediately. He read it, again impressed by her insight, and chuckled at one point:

Of course, I can’t know why you feel like you can’t get on with your life. I don’t think anyone can know for sure. But from everything you’ve said, one thing that comes to my mind is that when you walked into the forest, you made your peace and said goodbye to

your life, to everyone you loved and cared about. So, maybe it's hard to get used to the idea that you have a life to get on with, and you can't do anything until your mind adjusts to that. If that's true, then it's a matter of just waiting until you start wanting to do something. Maybe 'hiding in Grimmauld Place,' as you said, is the best thing for you for now. Like I said before, I think we naturally do what's best for us, even if we don't know why.

Amazing, thought Harry admiringly. I couldn't figure it out, no one around me could, but she did, just from my letters. Then again, maybe letters are better; it seems easier to talk about more personal topics this way than face to face.

He finished reading the letter, then scanned for any more letters demanding his immediate attention, but there were none. There were a dozen from the Wizengamot, probably all routine notifications of pending cases. Now, that's interesting, he thought. Is it okay for an Auror Leader to sit on the Wizengamot, judging people he caught, or his subordinates caught? Guess I'll have to work out that one over the course of time.

He went to the kitchen, found the coffee, and took out one bean from the bag. Back at the desk, he wrote a short note: "Would like to meet, preferably before tomorrow at 11:30 a.m. Please owl back with time and place." He put the note and the coffee bean into the envelope; he didn't sign it, knowing that the recipient would know who it was from. He found the owl that Hermione had bought while he was gone—white with brown patches, she had said he could use it if he wanted—and sent it off.

He then Apparated to a home he'd visited before, and rang the doorbell. He heard an Apparition behind the door; the occupant must have been upstairs, and Apparated downstairs to get the door, which opened. She smiled, but was incapable of anything other than a sad smile. "Hi, Harry."

"Hi, Luna," he said as she gestured him inside. "Hey, how did you get the house rebuilt? The last time I saw it, it was kind of... falling apart." He'd also seen the home in the visions, but it hadn't occurred to him to wonder why it wasn't a pile of rubble.

She shrugged her shoulders lightly. "So I heard. A kind man who lives not far from here did a spell that causes a broken object to fix itself by... going backwards, like a visual image being shown in reverse. It needs to be reinforced every now and then. So, I don't think the place will collapse on us." She looked around placidly, as if wondering if her words would cause it to happen. Nothing did, to Harry's relief.

He nodded. "I'm... very sorry about what happened."

She nodded her thanks. "I feel like you now. It's been almost two weeks since he died, but I can't seem to leave here, or do anything but what's necessary to get food. I have so many regrets."

They sat down on the sofa in the living room. "Well, at least you got to see him before he died. You were able to forgive him."

She looked at him strangely. "What makes you say that?"

"I went on... a kind of magical quest, maybe you could say, to get information on what to do about the dementors," he explained. "There was a very ancient, very powerful magical intelligence, and it gave me visions while I was doing it. One series of them was about your father. I saw you talk to him, the box in the closet, everything. I was glad he was able to die at peace."

She seemed to stiffen. "Harry, I don't want to criticize whatever gave you those visions, but they were wrong. I didn't see him before he died."

He was stunned. "That's impossible."

She shrugged. "I was at Hogwarts when he died. It was two days before they found his body; they had to take it away before I could see it, because it was starting to..." A tear welled up. "I couldn't even see him, much less talk to him. That was one of my biggest regrets."

He took her hand and held it. "I'm sorry, Luna. But I'm really confused. This intelligence, it was major, it was serious. I saw all kinds of things,

and had some of them confirmed since then. I'm sure they were true. I can't imagine why yours wouldn't have been."

"I don't know," she said absently. "Maybe what you saw was another dimension, or what I wished could have happened."

He frowned. "I don't think so. And what about the box in the closet?"

"I don't know what that is."

"Can we go up to your father's bedroom?"

She slowly nodded. "I haven't been up there, since... but yes, all right."

As they walked, she asked, "What have you been doing since you got back?"

"Letting people know that I'm Auror Leader, and working on a plan to get rid of the dementors."

"Oh," she answered, as if these were routine things. "What's Auror Leader?"

He briefly explained. "And, it means I'm going to really need the help of my friends. Obviously, including you."

They entered the bedroom. "Well, I may be available," she said. "I'm not sure whether I'm going back to Hogwarts or not."

"Why wouldn't you?"

She shrugged. "I just have a feeling that whatever I do with my future isn't going to involve N.E.W.T.s. But I also have bad associations with Hogwarts right now. I feel guilty for going there during the summer."

"Why?"

"I think it's because I was angry with my father, because of what he did. I think I unconsciously went back to the summer session instead

of staying with him because I didn't want to be around him. I might not have done it otherwise, and now I know that I really should have stayed with him, because of what happened to him. I was trying to get away."

"Stuff happened to you, too," Harry pointed out.

"I know. But I think Azkaban was almost worse than what I went through. It breaks a person's spirit. So," she said, looking around, "what was this box you mentioned?"

Could she have been given a Memory Charm? Harry wondered. Not impossible, but it would really be cruel. And what would be the purpose? The closet was already open; he could see the smooth wall in the upper part of the closet. "Reveal Magic."

A bright square suddenly appeared, then faded to reveal a compartment in the wall. Luna gaped at the closet, then at Harry. "Summon," he said. The familiar—to him—box with pictures of tulips on the lid drifted down into his hands.

He realized he needed to think about how it would hit her, since clearly, inexplicably, she had no idea what it was. "You need to know before I open this..." He suddenly felt the responsibility of something that could have a strong emotional impact. "Your father was already middle-aged when you were born. That's because he had another family—a wife, and an adult child—before your family. They died, at the same time. He was devastated, and after a while, met your mother. This box has mementos of his first family."

He expected her to be surprised, but she didn't react; there was a long silence. Finally, she slowly nodded. "This explains a lot of things. Little things; I had never put them together before. But especially, why he was always so worried, and so protective. Why did he never tell me?"

She seemed to be asking almost as a rhetorical question, but he answered. "He didn't want you exposed to tragedy. Your mother made him promise to tell you before Hogwarts, but..."

Her mouth opened slowly in understanding. "Then she died, and he couldn't face telling me. He'd already lost so much, I was the only thing he had. Then..." She started to cry. "...I abandoned him, he died alone..." Sobbing, she leaned her head into his shoulder; he held her.

"He didn't die alone, Luna," he said comfortingly. "I saw him die. He didn't die alone."

"I wasn't with him!" she exclaimed through tears. "Your vision was wrong!"

"I don't think it was," he said, stroking her hair. "I think there's another explanation."

She looked up at him, tears still falling. "Then, what?"

He gently wiped a few tears away. "Could you have been given a Memory Charm?"

She thought, then shook her head. "I was at Hogwarts when he died. There must be a dozen people who could confirm that."

Makes sense, thought Harry. "An impostor, Polyjuice Potion?" he asked himself aloud. "No, that doesn't make sense. Also, I think the vision would have told me if that was the case."

She opened the box, and gasped. "It's upside down!"

"What?" asked Harry. The photo album was put away face down, but so what?

"When my father puts something away, it's always face up," she explained, suddenly animated. "Most people do. But I always put things away face down. We used to joke about it. I put this away! I must have!" She had stopped crying, and almost seemed happy. "You must be right! But how? What happened?"

She started to flip through the pictures, settling on one of the three of them. "I almost never saw pictures of him, at this age," she remarked.

“He looks so nice, they all do. Tell me what you remember about the vision. What happened, what did I say?”

He related it as well as he remembered it. “When I watched it,” he concluded, “I was surprised that you would lie to him about my forgiving him. I thought you might have been able to, but obviously I didn’t.”

Her face lit up. “You did!”

“No, I didn’t.” Strange how the shoe is on the other foot now, he thought.

“Do you forgive him, now?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then you did!”

Wow, where did this come from? “I don’t get it.”

“Don’t you see, Harry? It’s the only answer. We go back in time.”

Thoroughly taken aback, he blinked, and thought about it. All of a sudden, it fell into place. “You’re right. We do.”

She nodded. “I wonder why, though. I’d be surprised if it was only for this reason. Not that it’s not a good reason, and I’m so glad he didn’t die alone. But usually, if you go back in time, there are more important reasons. I would guess, anyway.”

He was beginning to become more sure of his footing. “Yes, and I know what those reasons are. Luna, I’m the leader of the Aurors now, but there aren’t any Aurors. Well, only one besides me. I have to build a new group of Aurors. I’ve already asked Ron and Hermione, and they said they’d do it. I’m going to be asking more of Dumbledore’s Army. But I have to train them, and I’ll need Kingsley and Hestia to help me train them, and to train me, somewhat. It’ll take time, and wizarding society will be vulnerable in that time. Taking the whole group back in time is the perfect solution. But that means you come

too, and the feeling I get from you is that you wouldn't want to be an Auror."

She nodded. "You're right. I wouldn't. I'm sorry, but that isn't who I am."

"I know," he agreed. "Just like intuition, I knew. But then, why do you come back?"

"To talk to my father," she responded, as if it were obvious. "But there's probably another good reason. There'll be things that need to be done, with whoever you take back. Meals, daily life stuff. Maybe I'm the person who deals with that."

"But where are we going to go?" he wondered aloud. "Going back in time is incredibly risky, and with Voldemort around... all somebody has to do is say his name once, and we're in huge trouble, both in terms of safety and the timeline."

"You'll think of something."

He chuckled. "I appreciate your confidence."

She looked through the pictures. "Lots of flowers."

"She was a florist."

Luna continued looking, and after a few minutes, put them away. Harry levitated the box back into the closet, and the magical hiding place resumed operation. She suggested they go downstairs, and they did, sitting on the sofa again.

"I know you're busy," she said, "but I hope you can stay for a while. I've been alone for a long time, and I could use the company."

"Sure," he agreed.

"Thank you," she said, and leaned over to hug him from a sitting position. They held each other for a long moment. "Thank you for that."

I've needed that for a long time, too. Can you tell me more about his other family? Whatever you can remember from the visions?"

Two people without parents, without family, without anyone to really talk to for a long time, they talked for hours, about anything and everything. When he finally left, Harry felt a lot better, and a lot less alone; he knew she felt the same way. It gave him more strength with which to face the huge burden he was taking on.

As he got into bed that night, thoughts raced through his mind. It was the first time he'd slept in that bed since being kidnapped by the goblins, but it felt very different. Also very peculiar was that the last time he'd slept, he'd done so at the Sato home. It felt like a very long time ago.

He asked himself, are you really ready to do this? Part of his mind answered back, what choice do I have? I'm Auror Leader, and this society needs one like it never has before. I can blame Kingsley for the fact that I'm Auror Leader, but it's really just fate, I think. It's almost ironic: from society's point of view, I'm pretty much the perfect person to be Auror Leader. Already famous, already respected; I'm not going to have to prove myself to anyone. Well, to the Aurors, whoever they may end up being. They'll respect me, but I'll still have to prove to myself that I'm worthy to lead them, and just that test isn't going to do it. Being responsible for them is going to be the most daunting thing about this.

In their long conversation, he had said something to Luna along those lines. She said, when you deal with people, both Aurors or just anyone, know how much they like and/or respect you, and be the person they see you as. It seemed both simple and profound, but then, Luna had a talent for saying things like that. On that thought, he drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

"Ah, there you are. I was about to wake you up."

On his side, Harry didn't move as he slowly came awake. "It's nice to know that now that I'm back, you've resumed your role as my early morning comic relief."

"Hey, don't knock comic relief," protested Fred. "You had precious little of it in Japan, I daresay."

"Well, that was Yosuke's job. He wasn't bad, considering the cultural confines he has to work within. But sometimes I felt like I was their comic relief."

"There's a scary thought."

Harry sat up in bed and stretched. "Tell me about it. No, no one can hold a candle to you and George."

"That goes without saying. By the way, you should know that Yasunori summoned me through that shrine of theirs last night."

Harry grinned. "No kidding? Good for you, you old honored ancestor."

"Well, I may not be anyone's ancestor, but I do now seem to be a reasonably respected figure over there, for my role in what happened. His father gave him permission to talk to me through the shrine every now and then, but he still has to talk to his own ancestors sometimes too. It's a sad thing; I'm the only one who comes through that shrine who he really wants to talk to."

"That doesn't exactly mean a whole lot."

"Yes, it is rather damning with faint praise," agreed Fred. "He said he was going to call me next week, with the other two blokes you hung out with. Great privilege for them, I'd say."

"Hard to argue with that," joked Harry. "Oh, I figured out that riddle you gave me the first time you appeared here. When you said that you and I had something in common."

Fred looked mildly skeptical that Harry had solved it. "And that is?"

“We both died.”

Impressed, Fred nodded. “Yes, very good. Not literally, in your case, but in one way, definitely. How did you figure it out?”

Harry shrugged self-deprecatingly. “I kind of had to. As it turned out, I couldn’t get on with my life until I did.”

“Well, naturally,” agreed Fred. “But, just so you know, in the future you don’t have to take my riddles quite so seriously that you put your life on hold because of them.”

Harry chuckled. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

* * * * *

He took a shower, got dressed, and had breakfast, made by Hermione. She and Ron had offered to vacate the house, but Harry asked them to stay. Over breakfast, they talked about the day ahead.

Checking the mail, he found a response from Malfoy. “10:00 a.m. Malfoy Manor,” the note read. He would have several stops to make before then. The first was Hogwarts. He met with McGonagall, who reluctantly allowed him to disrupt a few classes. He asked to talk to a few students, the first one being Ginny. They met in an empty classroom.

“What class am I getting you out of?” he asked as they sat.

“Potions,” she replied casually. “I think Professor Slughorn really envies that I get to meet you, but he doesn’t.”

Harry grinned. “Probably.” The grin fading, he began. “First, I want to apologize. For everything I did, and everything I didn’t do.”

She shrugged, as if he were greatly exaggerating. “You don’t owe me any apologies. You had no obligations to me.”

He grunted. “Maybe not in the most literal sense. But morally, yes, I did. I should have tried harder to tell you what I was feeling, even

though I didn't know what that was. I had no idea how badly I was hurting you."

"You didn't hurt me, Harry. It's all right."

He would have known she was lying even if his new senses hadn't told him. His inclination would normally be to allow her to pretend she hadn't been hurt by what he did, but he felt a strong need to completely clear the air. The Japanese would never do what I'm about to do, he thought wryly. "Did Neville mention I had visions?"

"He said something about it. I wasn't sure how seriously to take it."

"No more wizards would be killed, everyone could live in peace again. All because of one very special baby. His name was Harry Potter.' Your mother told you that, as a bedtime story, when you were five years old. You went to sleep with visions of Harry Potter dancing in your head."

Her eyes went wide. "Wow, I barely remember that... okay, I take it back. Those were some impressive visions. What else did you see?"

"All the times I ignored you, that I hurt you by not paying any attention to you. That you hated Cho because I liked her and not you. That you had almost given up on me by the time I did notice you, and all it did was get your hopes up again, and you tried to pretend it didn't bother you when I broke up with you—"

"Okay, okay, I get it," she said, embarrassed. "Why did it need to show you all that?"

"It showed me five people who I hurt, whose actions I couldn't understand, or both. You were one of them. I hadn't realized how much I hurt you; I was just blind to it. Seeing stuff like that, for you and the others, made me understand that you can't really know what other people are going through. If what they do seems strange to you, probably there's a good reason, you just don't know it."

She looked down. "I guess we all do that. I did some." Looking into his eyes, she went on, "Neville tried to tell me that kind of thing, but I

didn't want to listen to him. He tried to get me to imagine what your life was like, all the stuff that's happened to you, how it might have affected you. He said if he were you, especially in the past year, he might have done exactly the same as you did. I didn't believe him, because I didn't want to. I was just thinking about myself. Everyone does it, Harry."

"Maybe. It's just a different thing, to see so directly the pain you've caused."

Clearly embarrassed, she continued on anyway. "Look, I... tried to act like it didn't bother me, because it's not right that you should have to feel bad about that. Yes, I was really angry with you sometimes, I was frustrated that you didn't notice me. But that's not your fault. You never lied to me, never led me to believe something that wasn't true. It's not your fault that I pined after you for five years, got all these ideas because you saved my life once. I feel stupid for having done it, but it has nothing to do with you. It was just me."

"Well, I wish you wouldn't feel stupid. I don't feel like you were stupid. But I get your point. You're being very good about it."

"Being happy with who I'm with now helps," she said. "But I couldn't have said all this two days ago. Yesterday, after you finished at the Ministry, Neville told me everything, including your conversation. We talked for a long time, including about some of this stuff. It's behind me enough now that I can see it more for what it was."

"And I want to say," she continued hesitantly, "even though I don't want to, but you may have seen it in the visions anyway... I was angry after you went to Japan, even though I was told the reasons. I knew that you had been through something crushing, but I mainly thought about it as how it affected me. I feel really bad about that. I know it didn't hurt you exactly, but still, I'm sorry."

"It's not like I've never had reactions I wasn't proud of. But, I appreciate it."

She nodded. "So, Neville said you might be wanting me and some others to help you today?"

“Yes, but I wanted to talk to you first. I hoped we could be okay with each other.”

“I’m okay,” she said. With a slight grin, she added, “Really, I’m not lying this time.”

He grinned. “I know.”

“You?” she asked.

Feeling more comfortable with her than he had for quite a while, he was reminded of how good it had felt to be with her before, and couldn’t help wondering what might have been. She was still very appealing... but she was with someone else now, and he had to accept that. Would I try to get her back, he asked himself, if it wasn’t Neville, but someone I didn’t know? I know I shouldn’t, but I’m not sure. But it is Neville, so I definitely can’t think about that. He felt a pang of regret, and tried to stifle it.

“I’m okay.”

“Are you lying?” she teased him.

He couldn’t help but grin, but he knew that he couldn’t even hint otherwise. Any regrets he had couldn’t reach her ears, or Neville’s. “You and Neville are my friends. If you’re happy, I’m happy. So, let me tell you about what I want you for, for today—“

“Wait, one other thing before we get to that,” she interrupted him. “I was wondering about it last night. Neville told me about the spell you did, how it works. Was there some reason that you chose him and not me? Like, you thought I was still angry with you?”

“Not like that,” he said. “I didn’t know Neville felt so guilty; the visions included him a few times, but were mostly about you. I didn’t know there would be a problem. With you... with that spell, you have to trust the person completely. I didn’t feel comfortable asking you to trust me, even if it was trust in a different way. I didn’t think I had a right to ask that of you.”

"Makes sense," she said, with a light sigh. "It sounded really cool, though. So, what do you need me to do?"

"First, I need to get Neville in here, and anyone else who was in the D.A. who's now at Hogwarts."

* * * * *

"You can't be serious," exclaimed McGonagall, thirty minutes later in the headmistress's office; Harry had just explained his intentions. "That's beyond dangerous. That's reckless."

Harry, Neville, and Ginny were in the office with her; Neville, as a Hogwarts professor, and Ginny, partly in her capacity as Head Girl. "It's far from reckless, Professor," protested Harry. "There is some danger, of course, I won't deny that—"

"Very generous of you," she put in sarcastically.

"Which is why I need as many people as I can get," he persisted. "And I need it not to get around. If I start looking at the Ministry for people who can do Patronuses, this won't work like it should. Having the Hogwarts students gives us an important leg up on the whole thing. Some people there will be able to do them as well, and that'll help. But every last one is important."

"Mr. Potter, I don't question that you need them for your plan to work. I question your plan. Professor Longbottom, what is your opinion of what Mr. Potter is proposing?"

Harry was sure Neville would support it, and he was right. "It's risky, but it's bold. I like it. And I do think that more people than we think will be able to help. Harry did ask people, in the Merlin speech, to learn the Patronus Charm. I have to believe that a lot did, and that most of them will be people who'll be attending. I think it should work."

"The point, Professor, is the question, what's the alternative?" asked Harry rhetorically. "There's just no other way to do this, unless you

want them back in Azkaban again. If you know a better way, I'm all ears."

"It might be better to delay this while more time can be taken to come up with a less risky plan."

He shook his head. "This event has already been set in motion; I can't change it, and another one wouldn't work the same way. It has to be now."

"You are asking people to unknowingly risk their lives!"

Harry hated to say it, but he knew he had to start acting like Auror Leader. "I don't see where that's your business, Professor," he said levelly.

Her mouth hung open. "I beg your pardon?" she said indignantly.

"I'm asking your permission for these students to help, and whatever risk there is, they'll know about. It seems to me that it isn't right for you to make that decision based on factors that have nothing to do with the safety of Hogwarts students, like the risk I'm asking other people to take. That's for me to worry about."

She continued to gape at him, as if he had taken leave of his senses. "Look, Professor," he said sternly. "I say this with all respect—and I really do respect you, and I think you know that—but I don't think you've really wrapped your mind around the fact that you're not talking to Harry Potter, middling Hogwarts student, but the Auror Leader, and what that means. You know what the Auror Leader test is, how horrific it is. I didn't ask to take it, but I passed it, which even Professor Dumbledore didn't do. It doesn't mean I'll have perfect judgment, but it means people will trust me to do what's right, what's best, as I see it. The risk to Hogwarts students is very minimal; they have Patronuses. The Auror Leader is asking for their help, and yours, for an operation that he thinks is important for our society."

There was absolute silence. McGonagall stared at him, apparently searching his eyes for any doubt or uncertainty. He stared back. No one had talked to her like that for a very long time, he was sure, but

he felt he had to. He would be asking more of her in the near future, and she needed to see him as Auror Leader. And the Auror Leader wouldn't hesitate to say such a thing to the Hogwarts headmistress, he was sure.

"Would the three of you wait outside in the hall for a moment," she said. The three nodded, and filed out, Harry last.

"Wow," said Neville as they stood in the hallway, at the top of the stairs.

Harry shrugged. "I think I was right. She needs to get used to it."

"She may need more time," said Neville. As Harry opened his mouth, Neville added, "I know what you're going to say, we don't have time. It's true, I know."

Harry could, if he concentrated, hear what was going on inside the office; she was talking to the headmasters' portraits. He heard Dumbledore say, "There has never been an eighteen-year-old Auror Leader, Minerva, so I understand that this is an adjustment for you. But his plan is reasonable. More importantly, he is right. The risk of his plan to others is not your concern."

"But he's always taken such large risks. Is he still doing it?"

"Minerva, he said it, and he was right: that simply isn't your decision."

Harry heard the unhappiness in her voice. "Albus, it doesn't feel right."

"Look inside yourself, Minerva. Are you thinking of him as an Auror Leader, or a Hogwarts student?"

She paused, then answered quietly; Harry had to strain to hear. "Honestly, I feel like a mother whose grown child just talked back to her, told her he's on his own now and doesn't need her help."

"He needs your help, Minerva, and your guidance. But this is an adjustment for him as well. As Auror Leader, he must stand on his

own; he must have the aura of command and confidence. Especially at the beginning, we must trust him.”

She sighed. “It is difficult, but I suppose you are right. But whether it is my business or not, I will ask: what is your opinion of his plan?”

“It is ingenious, showing audacity and creativity, turning the situation to his advantage. It is like a chess player embarking on a combination of moves whose outcome cannot be predicted with certainty; he does it because his intuition tells him it is the best course. If you accept the premise that the dementors must not be allowed back into Azkaban—a position which, as you well know, I have long held—his plan leads, I believe, to the lowest long-term loss of life. It may well save many.”

Harry heard nothing more, and a minute later, the door opened. Harry, Neville, and Ginny filed back in.

“Very well, Mr. Potter,” she said. “You will have whatever support you need. I only ask that you make abundantly clear to all involved that this is strictly voluntary. Not that that will stop them,” she added, half to herself.

“I was going to do that anyway, Professor,” said Harry. “But, thank you. Now, Neville, Ginny, you know a little better than I do exactly who can do a Patronus...”

* * * * *

With a little time to spare before 10:00, Harry made one of the stops he’d intended to at some point in the morning. Back at Grimmauld Place, he took the fireplace to the Witch Weekly offices, even though he could Apparate; he didn’t know if those offices allowed for Apparition, but he realized it was better if this, like most of his Auror Leader abilities, wasn’t commonly known.

Pinter looked up at the man coming out of his fireplace, and did a double-take, then grinned and got up to shake Harry’s hand. “I heard you were back. You’re speaking in Diagon Alley today?”

Harry nodded. “A few minutes after noon.”

“Good, I’ll be there. You know, Flourish has been spreading rumors since last night. Not only that you’re back, but that you might be taking the test for Auror Leader! You aren’t, are you? I mean, you’re still very young.”

“No, I’m not going to take the test for Auror Leader,” replied Harry, expressionlessly. After a slight pause, he added, “I already have.” He gazed at Pinter meaningfully.

“No...” exclaimed Pinter in disbelief. He took out his wand. “May I?” Harry nodded, and Pinter did the Reveal spell. Shocked, he sat down in his chair. “Unbelievable...”

Harry gave Pinter a moment to digest it, then asked, “When does Witch Weekly come out?”

“Friday. In time for the weekend.”

“And the deadline?”

“Usually Wednesday...” Pinter trailed off, as if not daring to hope.

“Tomorrow afternoon,” said Harry, “you can interview me. I’m not sure how much time I’ll have, but you’ll get three hours if I have it and you need it. Okay?”

Pinter’s eyes became as wide as saucers. “I assume that’s a rhetorical question. Of course, anytime, anywhere.”

“I’ll let you know the time tomorrow morning; we can meet, and I’ll get you past the Fidelius Charm on my home.”

Pinter looked even more stunned by this than by the revelation that Harry was Auror Leader. To himself, he marveled, “This is the ‘get’ of the century, any reporter would kill for this...”

“I hope, not you,” joked Harry, deadpan. “I’d rather not be interviewed by someone who would kill.”

Pinter grinned. "Well, that leaves out Skeeter, then."

Harry chuckled. "That's not the only reason she's left out." He remembered his father. Sorry, Dad, he thought, but I have to do what I feel comfortable with. Not that he'd argue with me, of course; it's just not what he would have done.

"This... this is because of Granger?" asked Pinter.

"She doesn't know about this, but if I understand your meaning, then, yes. I'd like to think that doing the right thing can have good results."

"Well, I'm convinced. Thank you, Harry."

"Thank you, for before. Until tomorrow."

* * * * *

Harry had never seen Malfoy Manor from the outside; it was almost large enough to resemble a castle; all it lacked was a moat. It seemed designed to be ostentatious. He rang the doorbell; a loud chime could be heard from inside.

Narcissa Malfoy opened the door; her greeting was more like a sneer. "Potter."

"Mrs. Malfoy," he said politely.

She raised an eyebrow. "Now, you call me Mrs. Malfoy? Where was this politeness before?"

"I was in Japan," said Harry. "They emphasize respect for elders."

She scoffed lightly as they walked down a hallway. "This respect has not extended to publicly crediting me for my actions."

"Friday," he said simply. "Witch Weekly."

Again, an eyebrow went up. "Why?"

“I’ve come out of hiding.”

“And why is that?”

“That,” he said as he saw Malfoy approach, “is what I’m here to see your son about. How are you doing, Malfoy?”

They shook hands. “Not bad. Staying out of trouble. How about you?”

“The usual. Getting into trouble, and selflessly helping others.”

Malfoy laughed. “I’ll bet.” Having reached the living room, he gestured Harry to a chair, and they sat. “Would you like some coffee? I mean, good coffee, not that pedestrian crap you sent me?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “It was a metaphor, Malfoy, not a gourmet recommendation.”

“Obviously,” sniffed Malfoy. “But why not have the finer things, if you can afford it?”

With a straight face, Harry replied, “Because it’s wrong to have more than others do.”

Foiled for just a second, Malfoy grinned. “Yeah, right.”

“No, no coffee, thanks. And how do you know what kind I sent anyway, from one bean?”

Narcissa spoke from the doorway that led to the kitchen. “There are spells that tell you such things, Potter. For those to whom they matter. You know, I was out earlier, and I heard the most absurd rumor. People are bizarrely excited that you have returned, and are ready to proclaim you Auror Leader.”

“Actually, that happens at noon, but yes, I did start the rumor. Don’t want it to be a complete shock.”

She stepped into the room, aghast. “You must be joking.”

Malfoy eyed Harry carefully. “No, Mother, I think he’s serious.” He held up his wand, gestured for permission, and did the spell. Nodding, he added, “It makes sense, now that I think about it. First test, skill test. Broom, right?”

Harry nodded. “How do you know what the tests are?”

With a superior look, Malfoy said, “We Malfoys know things. Things we’re not supposed to know. Second test, this one surprises me. You were able to off someone?”

“A bad guy, to save a hundred thousand. Still, it wasn’t easy.”

“No, I’d guess that’s the point,” agreed Malfoy. “Third and fourth, though, no surprise. That’s right up your alley.”

“Thank you for your sensitivity, Malfoy.”

“If you wanted sensitivity, this was not the place to come,” said Malfoy offhandedly. Seeing Harry’s face, he sighed. “All right, Potter. I know what that is,” he said, in a tone that suggested an apology that would never be spoken. “Still hurts.”

Harry nodded. “Always will.”

Malfoy’s expression was serious. “I get that. But what can I say? We talked about this before. It’s the price of heroism. I wouldn’t do it, and I wouldn’t feel bad about not doing it. Most people wouldn’t, which is why Auror Leaders are so rare.”

“I know. For the next few weeks after it happened, I swore that if I had it to do over, I wouldn’t do it.”

“Yeah. I can understand that. But you know, you would. You are who you are.”

“Unfortunately... it stinks, but yes, you’re right.”

“There must be some good things about being Auror Leader,” suggested Malfoy.

Harry shrugged. "If there are, I haven't—oh, wait, you'll like this. I talked to the Council of Elders yesterday. Told them Kingsley's staying."

Malfoy frowned. "Auror Leader doesn't have that power."

Harry grinned. "Not telling you how, but I can get dirt on the Council. They'll do what I say."

Malfoy laughed. "Oh, Potter, you're making me jealous! What a waste, that that power lies with you!" His laughter winding down, he added, "But why Shacklebolt? I know the timeline, Potter, I can put it together. He didn't ask you, he threw you in there. If I were you, I'd hate him."

"I did. Still not going to marry him. But I'm not doing him any favors. I'm the boss, and he knows it. He's going to be making it up to me for a long time."

Impressed, Malfoy nodded. "There may be hope for you yet."

"I'm so pleased you think so."

"I can tell. But there's not much point in being Auror Leader when there aren't any Aurors. I'd guess you're recruiting. D.A. people first, of course."

"Right again. So, Malfoy, would you like to join?"

Malfoy stared for a second, then burst into uproarious laughter that didn't abate quickly. Finally, Harry said, "I'm not kidding, Malfoy."

"I know, you moron," said Malfoy through laughter. "If you were kidding, it wouldn't be funny! Oh, Merlin..."

Harry waited for Malfoy to recover. "So, I guess that's a 'no'."

Malfoy laughed again. "Oh, my, that was funny. Sorry, Potter. I have to ask, is this because of Dumbledore?"

“No. I mean, I might never have thought in these terms if not for him, but this isn’t some project. I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t think it could work.”

“Then you’re an incredible optimist.” Malfoy shook his head in wonder. “I know you mean it as a compliment, Potter, and I will be nice enough to thank you for that. But I wouldn’t fancy you as my boss, and even if I could, it just isn’t me. Never mind walking into forests, even putting myself in danger for society’s sake isn’t something I could see myself doing. You should’ve known better.”

“I thought it was worth a shot.”

Malfoy chuckled as a thought occurred to him. “Slug Boy would’ve never forgiven you.”

It took Harry a minute to register the reference. “You’d have called him Slug Boy, he’d have called you Ferret Boy, you’d have gotten along famously.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” said Malfoy sarcastically. “But the slug thing was funnier, because he did it to himself.”

“Maybe, but that wand saved us later on.” Harry briefly told the story.

Malfoy grunted. “Lockhart deserved it, he was a buffoon. See? There’s my point. You can’t be an Auror with that kind of attitude, can you?”

“Well, I’d prefer to argue that he deserved it because he went around Obliviating people, but I see your point.”

“Yeah. Well... tell you what. Even if I can’t be an Auror, maybe I can help you out, in a weird way.” He pointed his wand down the hall, and soon a small, white object floated into the room and into Malfoy’s hand. He put it on the coffee table between him and Harry. “I’ll let you have this. Let’s call it an extended loan; can’t say for sure I won’t need it again.”

Harry looked closely; it was six-sided, shaped roughly like a diamond, though clearly not made of mineral. “What does it do?”

“Something that for me is incredibly unhelpful, but given what you have ahead of you, you may find useful. In a very confined area—not a whole lot more than the size of your body—it makes time go incredibly slowly. I think it’s eight thousand to one, something like that, meaning that one second under its influence would seem like two hours to the person using it. If you stand, it covers only your body. If you sit, there’s a small area in front of you that you can use. You can read a book, or write, if you keep everything close enough to your body. And of course, you can think. That’s about all you can do. You can shift position, but you can’t get up and move while you’re using it. Things like the need to sleep, eat, go to the bathroom, they all move at the pace it would be outside. You can go for what seems like weeks without needing to sleep, which is a weird feeling.”

I’d know about that, thought Harry. “Why are you giving—sorry, why are you extended-loaning it to me?”

“Out of the goodness of my heart,” cracked Malfoy. “So you’ll owe me a favor, obviously. That debt depending on how useful this is to you. I’ve used it for all I really can, for now, anyway.”

“Couldn’t you read a ton of books? Get important information?”

Malfoy shook his head. “Also, not me. I tried that, but I can’t stomach it. Got bored out of my mind at some point. May not be that different for you—one thing we have in common is not being bookworms—but this Auror Leader business may make it more valuable for you. So, give it a go.”

Harry nodded, picking it up. “I will. Thanks.”

They chatted for a few more minutes, and Harry left. Thought he’d say no, thought Harry, but I wanted to try. He is right, though, Ron would have had a fit, and whoever else I recruit wouldn’t have liked it. Oh, well.

* * * * *

In the largest open space in Diagon Alley, a crowd had been gathering since eleven o'clock; it was now almost full, with a few thousand people milling about. Harry walked to the hastily erected platform from behind, and wasn't seen until he was standing at the podium. He was greeted with cheers and very strong applause.

"Thank you. Thank you very much," he said, as after a minute, the applause finally started to die down. "It's good to be back.

"Thank you all for coming. I have an important announcement today. I think many of you know, but some of you don't, about a position called Auror Leader. To tell you about it, I've asked the Minister here today; I think he knows more about it than I do, having been an Auror himself."

Kingsley stepped up from behind and took the stage to a mostly indifferent crowd response that included some applause and a few scattered boos. Ignoring the response, Kingsley began. "I don't believe there's anyone here who is old enough to remember the last time our society had an Auror Leader..."

As Kingsley talked, Harry looked around. All the preparations had been made; he saw most of the D.A. members where he wanted them, at strategic points in the crowd. He'd used Malfoy's artifact soon after meeting him, and found that it did indeed produce the effect Malfoy had related; he'd kept an eye on a clock, which hadn't moved as he sat there. He'd spent what felt like a few hours thinking about what he would say, thinking about everything in general. He eventually stopped, if only because he found he was thinking unproductively about the operation to come. He would use the artifact more later.

Kingsley was describing to the audience in general terms what the test entailed, and explaining that any Auror who wished was entitled to view the memory of the important parts of the test, "so they can know exactly what the Auror Leader was willing to give up, what hardships and sacrifices he was willing to make for the sake of the other Aurors, and society in general. Now, we already knew this about Harry Potter, but still, to be Auror Leader, one must take the

test. Many of the greatest names in our history, Aurors and non-Aurors, have taken and failed this test. Only fifteen in over a thousand years have passed, and Harry Potter has become the sixteenth.”

Kingsley was interrupted by an enormous burst of applause, and it continued for longer than a minute. It washed over Harry, and he felt conflicting emotions. He was proud, of course, and he thought of what his father would be feeling, or was feeling, if he could watch. He knew that it represented people’s real feelings. But he also remembered what he’d said to Ron and Hermione, that one Rita Skeeter article could change it. Now he realized it wasn’t quite that simple, but he did feel that the basic premise was true, that this adulation could go south at any time. He enjoyed it on one level, but knew from his days at Hogwarts that he couldn’t become addicted to it. Things could always change.

Suddenly, the sky started to get darker, and even though he couldn’t see them yet, he knew they weren’t far away. He stepped forward quickly, elbowing Kingsley out of the way.

He made sure to keep his voice calm. “Attention, everyone, please keep calm. We are under attack by dementors, many of them. Walk, don’t run, inside. If you have a Patronus, please stay and help us.” He saw a few people start to run. “WALK, DO NOT RUN!” he shouted in as commanding a tone as he could manage. “We are going to take care of the dementors, once and for all.”

The dementors—Harry guessed there could be as many as a hundred or more—swarmed in a tight group into the middle of the crowd. Good, thought Harry. He saw what looked like fifty Patronuses go up, with more joining all the time. “We are keeping them in one group, bottled up,” said Harry to the crowd, which was starting to thin, but not as much as Harry would have thought.

He stepped down from the stage, and was met by Ron, Hermione, and Neville; they joined hands. Already having agreed that they would follow his stag, Harry trusted the D.A. and others to keep the main group of dementors at bay, and Kingsley to reset the shield so the dementors couldn’t escape. He had planned it, Kingsley and Hestia had approved it, and he had to focus on what only he could do.

Fortunately, speed was not one of the dementors' strong points. Harry's Patronus found the nearest one, and they quickly boxed it in, and in only a few seconds, they heard the groaning and popping noises. Harry found another one, and they did it again.

After five had been destroyed, both dementors and onlookers began to take notice. "They're killing them!" shouted a wizard. "They're killing the dementors!" For their part, the dementors seemed to be trying to flee; they glided upwards, but at a height of a hundred feet ran into the shield, and could go no further. As Harry had hoped, but Kingsley hadn't promised, the shield was now small enough to only encompass the part of Diagon Alley in which they were standing.

Harry found another low-flying one and they trapped it, bringing the count to six. This time, people were clearly watching, and there was a small cheer when the dementor popped and disappeared. Some of the Patronuses were following the dementors up to the top of the shield; Harry shouted as loudly as he could, "Keep your Patronuses low! Your job now is to block them from coming down, not push them away! We need them bottled up!" The Patronuses came down, and now several dozen Patronuses ran back and forth at a height of between forty and sixty feet.

Harry now had to reach high in order to get the next one; his stag pushed one of the desperate dementors away from the others, and his friends boxed it in as he did. Seconds later, it made the now-familiar popping noise, and disappeared; there was another, slightly louder cheer. "Keep those Patronuses going, this could take a while," Harry shouted at his helpers. "Stay alert."

One by one, the dementors fell. It was slow, since Harry and the others were the only ones able to do it. As each one was eliminated, the crowd cheered louder and louder, and slowly grew as people who had gone inside came back out at the urging of those who were still watching.

Some of the D.A. members, including George and Ginny, slowly made their way over to Harry and the others, partly because interested citizens were occasionally trying to talk to Harry, Ron,

Hermione, and Neville, and they had to concentrate on what they were doing. D.A. members shooed them away while also maintaining their own Patronuses.

To Harry's great surprise, the crowd over the next ten minutes filled up even more; they obviously understood that the danger was past, and he guessed they all wanted to see what was clearly a unique event. Harry and the others got rid of one dementor every thirty seconds or so, the cheers growing still louder.

Finally, fewer and fewer were visible—in a group, they could be seen easily, but individually, it was difficult. After they had killed the last one that could be seen, there was a pause as they looked around. "Can anyone see any more?" shouted Harry. A few answers of 'no' greeted him. "Okay, send your Patronuses anywhere you want. Let's see if there's any to flush out." Another minute passed as Patronuses flew all about, but no more dementors were seen.

Harry looked at Ron, Hermione, and Neville, and they exchanged smiles. Harry stepped back up to the podium, and found the magical microphone again. "Well," he said, "that would seem to take care of the dementors."

He had planned to continue, but to his surprise, a huge cheer went up, and there was strong applause; it was as though a celebration had started. He waited for it to die down, but two minutes later, it was still going strong. Finally, it started to quiet down, and he could speak again.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you to Dumbledore's Army, and the other Hogwarts students and teachers who helped out... and to anyone who happened to come here today and contributed their Patronus. And of course, to my close friends Ron, Hermione, and Neville." He looked in the front of the crowd to find them, and applauded in their direction, after which the audience did as well.

"I should explain that spell, which was something I learned when I was away, just before I came back. I'd been hoping to find something like that for a while. The way it works is very ingenious, and symbolic. The four people doing the spell trap the dementor, as you saw, with

their Patronuses. But there's something very specific about it: the four people doing it must be close friends, must trust each other, otherwise, the spell doesn't work.

"I think it's symbolic because that's what we need our society to be like. I spent the last three months in wizarding Japan. I was hosted by a very kind family, and I made some friends. It's a very unique culture, and it has a lot of aspects that would seem very strange to us. But one lesson I took from there is the part of their culture that says that they have to consider themselves as one people, one culture, not a lot of individuals doing their own thing. They're raised to consider, when they do something, how it affects others much more strongly than we do. Now, I'm not saying that we should do that with everything we do in our lives, but I think the idea is an important one. The late, great Professor Dumbledore told all of Hogwarts, after Voldemort came back, that we needed to work together to fight him.

"I get credited with getting rid of Voldemort, sometimes as if I did it all by myself. Well, obviously, I didn't. A lot of people worked very hard to make that happen, and some of them lost their lives for it. Everyone who risked something deserves credit. We do best when we work as a group. In Japan they have an entire category of group spells, which they learn from childhood and are unknown to us. Not that we have to start learning group spells all of a sudden, but you get my point.

"Now, while I was gone, the wizarding world suffered a terrible tragedy, the loss of almost all of the Aurors. Of course I'll be recruiting new Aurors, and undertaking an accelerated training program. During that time, we'll also continue to rely on the assistance of Percy Weasley and others from the Ministry in their efforts to provide security for the population. But it's also very important to me to ask you, all of you, in this very difficult time, to work together. Try to do something to help your fellow citizens, no matter what it might be. Think of what's best for society before thinking about what's best for yourself. If we can do that, we can get through this time. And I'll be asking you to help me, as I do my best to help you, help all of us. We're a community, and we need to come together." Harry paused as the crowd applauded vigorously.

“As you know, the goblins kidnapped me a few months ago. They wanted to put me on trial for breaking into Gringotts, though I eventually learned that their main motivation—from one particular leader, the last one who had personally witnessed terrible treatment of goblins by humans—was to get revenge for humans’ historical misdeeds. Unfortunately, it didn’t matter to him that no human alive was responsible for that. What the goblins did to the Aurors was inexcusable and unforgivable.” The crowd started to applaud; Harry held up his hands, asking them not to. “But, but... most of their society didn’t agree with what he was doing, just like most of our society didn’t agree with Voldemort when he was in charge here. They should have resisted him more; they didn’t, and that’s their failing. That leader is dead now, dead in the nuclear blast that killed the Aurors.” The crowd cheered; Harry hadn’t intended them to, but didn’t try to quiet them. He waited until they were finished. “Now, we need not to waste our time and energy trying to hunt down goblins. We need to devote it to rebuilding our society. They’re in hiding, and I don’t think we could find them even if we tried. But, we shouldn’t try. We have more than enough constructive things to do.

“Finally, there’s something I need you to understand. After I found out how to kill the dementors, Ron, Hermione, Neville, and I practiced against a few that had been holed up in the Ministry. After that worked, I came up with this plan. I knew people here would be happy, and that happiness would lure the dementors. I had Kingsley lower the shield, then when they came, raise it to trap them. I made sure there were plenty of Patronus users around. The risk to those attending was small, but not zero. I did it because it was the only way to lure most or all of the dementors together; to give them something they couldn’t resist. If I hadn’t done this, it would have been a matter of slowly, painstakingly hunting them down while they soul-sucked more and more. I asked everyone to share some risk, while not knowing they were doing it. That may happen sometimes, though of course no more often than it has to. I’m just going to ask you to trust me when that happens, that it was the best way, and that I wouldn’t ask anyone to take any risk I wouldn’t take myself.” This was met with healthy applause; he was most gratified by that applause, coming when it did, as it suggested they wouldn’t hold what he did against him.

“All right, that’s most of what I had to say. Now, as we were going to do before the dementors interrupted us, there was supposed to be some ceremonial thing where Kingsley does the Reveal spell on my forehead, where you can see the mark that’s given to all Auror Leaders on their forehead. Though I will ask you all not to try to do Reveal Magic spells on me when I’m walking around, as I’ve had more than enough people staring at my forehead for a lifetime.” The line got some laughs, as Harry had hoped it would.

“Okay, Kingsley... where is he?” he said, half to himself, to more chuckling. “Oh, over there.” He saw Kingsley talking to an older man wearing green robes, which he recognized as those of a Healer, most of whom operated out of St. Mungo’s. “Okay. Well, while we wait for Kingsley, I’ll just say that while it seems likely that what we got was all of them, and that even if it wasn’t they’ll probably hesitate to show their faces again, we can’t take it for granted that they absolutely won’t attack again. So, while we should take the shields down, and not fear to walk or fly around again, we should exercise caution for a while. If you see any, contact the Ministry immediately—”

Kingsley bounded up onto the stage and leaned into the microphone. “Sorry, Harry, I was talking to Healer Robertson, the senior Healer at St. Mungo’s. He reported... something most extraordinary. As you know, the people whose souls had been sucked by the dementors were being kept alive in a certain St. Mungo’s ward. Well, starting a little less than an hour ago, those people started... waking up.”

“What do you mean, waking up?”

To Harry’s surprise, he could hear real emotion in Kingsley’s voice. “I mean, they started regaining consciousness, asking questions. Some remember having their souls sucked—”

“But that’s impossible!” Harry exclaimed, forgetting for the moment that he was on a stage with a few thousand people watching him. “I was told that that’s permanent!”

“They’re as surprised as you are, as I am,” agreed Kingsley. “That’s what we thought. But we also thought dementors couldn’t be killed. The best guess we have right now is that... somehow, the dementors

kept those souls within them, and when you and the others killed the dementors—“

“The souls were freed,” finished Harry, awed. “How many have come back?”

“Almost all of them,” said Kingsley “About ninety or a hundred.”

“Oh, my God... I never... imagined...”

“No, none of us did. So, your information saved, or restored, about a hundred lives. Good first day as Auror Leader.”

Prompted by Kingsley’s comment, the crowd cheered again, and a chant started, and grew. “Pot-ter! Pot-ter!”

Emotional, Harry just stood there, not quite knowing what to say. He let them chant for a minute, then held up his arms, asking them to quiet down. Finally, they did. “I was just saying to someone earlier today that I like to think that if you do the right thing, there may be a good result that you didn’t expect. Letting the dementors stay in Azkaban was wrong; anyone who had ever been around one would know that even real criminals didn’t deserve it. Kingsley didn’t end this by letting them go back, because it was wrong. If he had, I wouldn’t have had to look for another answer, and this would never have happened.”

He took a deep breath, then turned to Kingsley. “Okay, are we going to do this thing?”

Kingsley waved his wand, and the Reveal spell showed not only the mark on his forehead, but enlarged it so that it was seen, two meters wide, above his head. “By virtue of this mark, the mark of the Auror Leader,” read Kingsley, “I, the Minister of Magic, do certify that Harry Potter is, until resignation or death, the Auror Leader, possessing unchallenged control of all matters related to the Aurors or law enforcement and security, responsible to no one but his own conscience, and responsible for the safety and security of the people of the wizarding world. Do you, Harry Potter, accept this title and responsibility?”

This is it, thought Harry. “Yes, I do.”

“Congratulations, Leader Potter,” said Kingsley solemnly, extending his hand; Harry shook it, and the image of the mark disappeared. The crowd applauded once again. “I’ll be seeing you all in Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, and wherever there are wizards,” he said to the crowd. “Thank you very much for your support.” He waved a few times as a last burst of applause and cheers erupted. He stayed on the stage for a minute, then looked down to the right and saw his friends. He waved one last time, and walked down the steps. Hermione was first, and she hugged him hard. Then Ron, Neville, Ginny, George, Luna, Cho, Dean, Padma, Parvati... he had never felt part of a community quite so much as he did then.

* * * * *

Next: Chapter 22, A New Chapter: Even though he understands Kingsley’s actions far better than before, Harry finds it difficult to forgive him. Also, Harry finally agrees to tell his story, in a way that stuns Ron and Hermione.

Chapter 22 is the final chapter.

From Chapter 22: “Madam Umbridge, you were responsible for persecuting Muggle-born wizards, accusing them of stealing magic, taking their wands. Do you regret that?”

“Of—of course. I had to do it, the government was insistent. I feared for my safety. I hated what I had to do.” She sounded convincing, but Harry knew that every word she had said was a lie. “Mr. Potter... if there is anything I can do for you...”

“There is, Madam Umbridge. I’d like you to resign as Undersecretary.”

Chapter 22

A New Chapter

A few hours later, Harry walked down the halls of St. Mungo's with Cho and the senior Healer. "How are they doing?"

"As well as can be expected, Leader Potter," said the man. Is that really the title? wondered Harry. Guess so, Kingsley said it, but somehow it doesn't sound right. Last two letters being the same, I'm not sure if that's good or bad. Like it rhymes or something. Definitely not going to let the Aurors call me that.

"They won't be able to move that much," added Cho. "Their muscles have atrophied to various extents. The ones who were attacked on the day of Fred's funeral, they were less affected, but they'll still need a few days to recover. About twenty people have been here longer, some attacked when the previous government was in power, and just a few before that."

Cho opened a door, and Harry saw a very large—magically expanded?—room, with about twelve rows of ten beds, very simple. Harry reminded himself that this hadn't been a high-priority area—the people hadn't been expected to ever recover—so there had been no problem putting so many into one room. As they walked in, Cho added, "They've been told what happened, of course."

"Harry!" shouted a familiar voice three rows to Harry's right; it was Dennis Creevey. There was light applause as most tried to clap, but some couldn't manage it. "Hands down, everyone," admonished the senior Healer. "Don't try to rush along your recovery. I'm sure Leader Potter understands your sentiments."

Harry conjured a chair near Dennis's bed, and sat. "Hi, Dennis. How are you doing?"

"Alive again, thanks to you," said Dennis fervently. "If anybody could do the impossible, you could. Colin would be proud."

Harry nodded. "Thanks, Dennis. What was it like? Do you remember anything?"

Dennis shuddered. "Just the soul-sucking thing; it was horrible. When it was happening, I felt like it was like dying, only worse. I was sure that that was the end, that was it. That was the last thing I remember. They tell me that over three months have passed since then, but for me, the funeral was less than a day ago."

"It's probably better that way," said Harry. "If my soul had been removed by a dementor, I probably wouldn't want to remember the time in between."

"Yeah, it seems kind of disgusting," agreed Dennis. "But now I'm back. Harry, can you promise me one thing?"

"What's that?"

"I heard about the Aurors, and that you have to recruit new ones. I want to join, as soon as I can."

Harry smiled. "I'm sure you'll be good. I can't promise you'll get in, but I can promise to consider you carefully, give you every chance. So, work hard at Hogwarts, and listen to Professor Longbottom."

"Neville's the DADA teacher? Oh, wow, he'll be good!" enthused Dennis.

"I think so too," agreed Harry. "Take care of yourself, Dennis."

Dennis gripped Harry's hand for a few seconds; Harry nodded and patted Dennis on the shoulder before standing. He walked around, saying hello to people he didn't know, accepting their thanks. Soon he saw a familiar face: Dolores Umbridge. He turned to Cho and the Healer, who had been following him. "Could I have a moment alone with the Undersecretary?"

Surprised, they nodded, and moved off. Harry conjured a chair and sat. "Madam Umbridge," he whispered. "How are you doing?"

“Problem—with my voice,” she said, and indeed, it sounded rough from disuse; she couldn’t speak above a whisper. “Thank you for what you did. But of course, I should not have been in Azkaban in the first place. I may—sue the Ministry—false imprisonment...”

“Madam Umbridge, you were responsible for persecuting Muggle-born wizards, accusing them of stealing magic, taking their wands. Do you regret that?”

“Of—of course. I had to do it, the government was insistent. I feared for my safety. I hated what I had to do.” She sounded convincing, but Harry knew that every word she had said was a lie. “Mr. Potter... if there is anything I can do for you...”

“There is, Madam Umbridge. I’d like you to resign as Undersecretary.”

Confused, she stared at him. “W—Why?”

“Because you regret what you did,” he whispered. “You want to make a fresh start, and in repentance for your actions, you’re resigning as Undersecretary. You can’t, in good conscience, continue in that position with the stain on your record. But you will remain in the Wizengamot, and hope to use that position to redeem yourself, by judging fairly and compassionately.”

She stared at him again. If looks could kill, thought Harry... “And if I refuse?” she croaked.

“First of all, all I would have to do is tell the truth about what you did to me three years ago, and you would be the political equivalent of a leper,” said Harry, still keeping his voice very low. “But that wouldn’t even be necessary. You see, I’m Auror Leader, and I could bypass the Wizengamot entirely and have you put in Azkaban, just on my say-so. I have that power, and I advise you not to tempt me. What you did, both to me and to the Muggle-borns, more than merits it. My offer is a bargain, Madam Umbridge. I expect to hear of your resignation within twenty-four hours.”

He stood. In a normal tone, he added, "I hope you feel better soon." Knowing she was looking daggers at him, but not caring, he walked off and rejoined Cho and the senior Healer. Before coming to St. Mungo's, he'd used Malfoy's artifact for an hour—a half a second of real time—thinking about things. He'd decided to offer Umbridge that option, because while he could put her in Azkaban, he couldn't—no one could—strip her of her Undersecretary position. He wanted Kingsley to have an Undersecretary appointment, and at the same time, it would remove a thorn in Kingsley's side. He let her stay in the Wizengamot because, as one of many, she could do much less damage there. He had considered simply having her prosecuted for her actions, but was unsure how it would come out legally; he wasn't sure what law her Hogwarts punishment broke, and she could argue that she was simply a functionary of the previous government. So, he would offer a compromise. Normally, he wouldn't threaten anyone with extralegal punishment—he didn't want to get into such a habit—but for her, he would easily make an exception.

He walked up and down the rows, and finally saw another familiar face. He conjured the chair, and sat again. "Dedalus," he said kindly. "How are you?"

"Alive, which is better than I deserve," the small man said dejectedly. "I am so sorry for what happened to your Muggle family, Harry. I failed them. I broke under torture, and gave away their location."

Harry patted him on the arm. "I know. It's okay, Dedalus. They're okay."

The man stared in shock. "How can that be?"

"It's a long story, but the main point is that it turns out Dudley is a wizard. He was able to fight off the attacker, and he and his family survived, with no injuries. They were lucky."

"Indeed they were," agreed Dedalus. "It is quite a load off my mind, but still, my conscience plagues me—"

"No one can be expected to stand up under torture," said Harry firmly. "I know that. No one who had ever been tortured would blame you for

a second. Please, don't let that disturb you. You did the best you could."

The man's eyes seemed to moisten. "You are so kind, Harry. You always have been, even when I first met you, before you went to Hogwarts. And now, look at what you have done. You have fulfilled all the promise that anyone said you had, and then some. Your forgiveness is truly a blessing."

Well, let's not go that far, Harry thought but didn't say. "It's nothing more than the truth. But thank you for what you said. I hope you'll be feeling better soon."

"I have little doubt of it. Thank you again, Harry Potter."

* * * * *

Harry Apparated to the room in which he'd taken the Auror Leader test. He looked over at the energy field he'd been in to take the test, and memories of taking the test hit him again. It hadn't really happened, but in a way, it had.

He looked again at the glowing door that he'd seen after waking up. Then, he hadn't cared about it, or wondered what was in it. Now, not only did he care, but he was sure he more or less knew. A secret room, he guessed, visible only to those who've passed the test.

The door had no handle. When he got close, the image of the door started to fade, and he knew he could simply walk through. He did, and the room was quite large, covering what Harry guessed to be the surface area of a small house. To his surprise, the energy field was there as well, with a comfortable leather chair in the middle of it. There was a desk, old artwork on the walls, and a few rows of bookshelves. He walked around, taking everything in, and soon saw against the far wall what would no doubt be the highlight of the room for him: another comfortable chair facing the wall, giving a view of three rows of five portraits each.

He sat in the chair. "Hello, gentlemen."

The one on the lower right spoke. "My, but you are quite young. My name is David Wilton, and I was the most recent Auror Leader before you, the fifteenth. I died in 1917. And you are?"

"Sorry. My name's Harry Potter. To be honest, I'm surprised you haven't heard of me. Everyone has. Don't you have other portraits?"

Wilton shook his head. "Because of that," he said, gesturing his head to the energy field, "time does not move in this room. But it affects us differently: when no one is in the room, it... does not exist, in a sense. When I died, I moved into this portrait, and I was given an hour to talk to the others and get used to being a portrait. Then, suddenly, you were here. Because of that, unlike other portraits, we do not have other frames; we do not move. We are here strictly for the benefit of the current Auror Leader. Now, may I ask, what year is it?"

"It's 1998," said Harry. "September."

Surprised gasps came from many of the portraits. "My goodness," said the thirteenth Auror Leader. "An eighty-year gap; the second longest on record."

"I assume, then, that the Muggle War is over?" asked Wilton.

Harry frowned. "I'm sorry, which war is that?"

"The one in which Muggles in Europe have been senselessly sending their young boys to die in trenches, giving up thousands of lives to gain a few yards here or lose them there—"

"Oh, yeah, World War I. I read about that a little—"

"One?" demanded Wilton. "There was another?"

"Yes, in the 1940s, but history's never been my strong point."

"Well, you must find out. We depend on the next Leader to keep us informed of the march of years. How old are you?"

They're not going to like this, thought Harry. "Eighteen."

More shocked reactions. "Eighteen?" repeated Wilton in disbelief. "An eighteen-year-old was allowed to take the test?"

"I didn't ask to take it." Well, thought Harry, if time doesn't move in this room, then I have all the time in the world to explain this to them. "There's a story I need to tell you, and then it might make more sense..."

He told them, then stayed in the room for what was to him another six or seven hours. There was a lot to learn, a lot to read, and a lot to plan. He told the portraits about the situation that faced him, and they gave him some advice.

* * * * *

Harry Apparated into Kingsley's office; Kingsley was in the middle of a conversation with Bill. "Hi, Kingsley. Sorry, didn't mean to interrupt." He nodded to Bill, who nodded back.

"That's okay, we were almost done anyway," said Kingsley. "Bill was just telling me about the bank's plans."

Harry hadn't thought about it since he'd returned. "Oh, yeah, how's that going?" He sat in the chair next to Bill.

"Very well, which reminds me, we need you to do more forms, with the Elder Wand; we're running low."

"Sure. Just bring them around to Grimmauld Place, and I'll get on them."

"Thanks. Anyway, it's grown greatly. A building is under construction in Diagon Alley, and we're up to ten employees. A competitor has started up, a month ago, aiming at the high end of the market, but we got most of it first, so it's questionable whether they can survive. With more people, it's gotten so I can finally work only eight hours a day. So, Fleur's happy."

"Well, that's the important thing," Harry joked.

“You better believe it,” agreed Bill. “And we’ve had a lot more capital investment. Your capital was the bank’s only capital at the beginning, but businesses have been buying in; we’re up to eight million Galleons, which is great growth in such a short time. It also means that, if you wanted, you could decrease your capital. That is, you could reduce your ownership share, and have the money for your own use again.”

Harry shrugged. “I’m okay, for now. But let me ask, is this the kind of ownership where they get to decide what the bank does?”

“Nope. Fortunately, due to the early start we got, we were in a good enough position that we didn’t have to offer voting shares. They have ownership, they share in profits, but they don’t have voting rights, and they don’t decide policy. So, you needn’t worry.”

“Good, I’m glad to hear that.” Bill talked to Kingsley for another minute and left. Kingsley looked at Harry. “In the future, maybe you want to Apparate into the other room there. Knock on the door, I’ll get up and go in there.”

“What if you’re in that room?”

“Then I’m napping. Or, it’s very late at night, and I’m sleeping there, which has happened before. Unlike you, I can’t Disapparate out of here.”

Harry was puzzled. “You can’t take the one-minute walk to Apparition range?”

The expression on Kingsley’s face told Harry that the discussion was too trivial for him to worry about. “Apparating when you’re very tired isn’t always the best idea. Increases the chance of Splinching. Anyway, what can I do for you?”

“I thought we should talk about what I’m going to do to rebuild the Aurors. I’m hoping for at least twenty at first, but I’ll take more if there are good people who want to do it. I need to let you know what we’re going to do.”

“By ‘we’, you mean you and the Aurors, right?”

“No, I mean you, too. There’s only two Aurors with any real Auror experience,” pointed out Harry. “I can’t train Aurors, I’ve never been one. Well, okay, during the test, but that hardly counts. I’m going to be relying on you and Hestia to do most of the training.”

“I’ll do what I can, Harry, but you have to keep in mind that I’m the Minister. At least, for now. I thought the Council was going to sack me today, but I guess they decided to put it off until the excitement over you dies down.”

Harry shook his head. “Nope. Sorry, but you’re staying.” He explained what he had done with the Council. “So, unless there’s a full-scale riot demanding your removal, you’re not going anywhere. I need a Minister who isn’t going to try to politicize me.”

“So, this isn’t personal, one way or the other.”

Harry took a deep breath, and sat back in the chair. “I was naïve. I didn’t know the pressures you were looking at. Not only with all of society in general, but having to worry about who’d been corrupted by Voldemort, and what they might do. I looked at it strictly as a personal thing. ‘Kingsley’s my friend, he wouldn’t do that to me.’ I realize it wasn’t quite that simple.”

Solemnly, Kingsley nodded. “I’m glad you understand that. I really wanted to let you have that time. You did deserve it. But, like you said... I’ve second-guessed myself for that more times than you can imagine. So... are we okay?”

Harry paused. “You should have asked me. I understand why you did it, I know both sides, I know that you’d been thinking about it before. That you’d planned all along simply to ask me, and that bothered you, because you knew I couldn’t really understand what it involved. And then you rescued me, and... there was your chance, being handed to you on a silver platter. But you still should have asked me.”

Kingsley met his gaze. “You would have said no.”

“Probably,” agreed Harry. “All the more reason not to do it. It’s a hell of a thing to ask of someone who doesn’t want to do it, not only the test, but the job itself. Maybe this isn’t what I wanted to do with my life.”

“You could have come back and joined a Quidditch team,” Kingsley pointed out. “You chose to do this.”

“Yes, I could really come back to an Auror-less society and do my own thing, not care if Dark wizards make a huge comeback,” said Harry sarcastically.

“If the Aurors hadn’t been killed—“

“I don’t know,” answered Harry honestly. “I doubt I ever will. I’m not saying this didn’t have the best result for society. I’m saying that if you respect someone, you don’t do something that changes their life so radically without asking them. That was going to change my life radically whether I passed the test or not.”

“I know. But let me ask you this. Suppose I had a vision, or a prophetess told me, that if you give Harry the test and he passes, a hundred people who would otherwise die, won’t die. Does that make it okay?”

Harry paused, then admitted, “The fact that I even pause to think about it suggests that you have a point. I can’t answer that. But I do know that if I were in that position with Ron or Hermione, I wouldn’t just do it. I would ask them.”

Sadly, Kingsley nodded. “I know. Maybe I’m trying to justify my actions. I asked you those questions because I wanted to make sure you’d really thought about it from my side, and it seems like you have. I don’t think there are any truly right or wrong answers to questions like this. But... whether this means anything or not, I want to apologize for what I did.”

“Well, it worked,” pointed out Harry, not wanting to address what Kingsley had said about the apology meaning anything. If Kingsley

was asking for forgiveness, Harry wasn't sure he could do it just then. Maybe in the future... "You rolled the dice, needing snake eyes, and you got them."

"I know," said Kingsley heavily. "But just because you win doesn't mean that gambling is all right."

Harry nodded. "But it's ironic that British Airways just happened to take me to Japan, to a country where what you did would have been universally approved. Not that they totally changed my mind, but you could say that I got another view on the whole question of how much people should do for society. By the way, I do want to say that I appreciate your telling Sato to warn me to leave the country if you got sacked, and not telling me what happened to the Aurors. I know you were trying to keep me away from it."

"One could argue that it was self-serving," said Kingsley. "You were going to come back anyway—well, probably—and it was just a question of when. If it was by your own choice, you were more likely to accept your fate, as it were."

"You could argue that," agreed Harry. "But I know that wasn't the reason."

"Say, how do you know that, anyway?"

"When I was getting the dementor information, I had visions, saw some stuff that helped me understand things. Anyway, what I came here to tell you was that you're, you and Hestia, are going to help train us, and so that society isn't too unprotected while that's happening, we're all—you, me, Hestia, and whoever I recruit—are all going back in time, about a year. I know one year isn't total training, but it'll do for the basics."

Kingsley's eyes went wide. "And how are we going back in time?"

Harry reached into his robe and pulled out a Time-Turner. "All of them were supposed to have been destroyed, but one had been lost before that. Auror Leader stuff allowed me to see that happen, and about an hour ago, I went and found it."

Kingsley shook his head in wonderment. “But we can’t do it in England—”

“I know, too dangerous,” agreed Harry. “There’s an island, in the South Pacific, that’ll do. It’s shielded from Muggles by magic, and no one lives there. One of the former Auror Leaders—I can talk to the portraits—told me about it. We go there, do basic training, and come back a day after we left. The new Aurors won’t be fully trained, but it’ll be a good start. Other things, like character tests, can be done when we’re finished with that. So, you and Hestia will have all the time you need to do whatever training you can, in one year.”

Kingsley whistled, impressed. “You can talk to Auror Leaders’ portraits? I didn’t even know they existed. Where are they?”

“A kind of sanctuary, a room that only the Auror Leader can enter, or even see. I just found it this afternoon, but they’ve already been very helpful.”

“I’ll bet,” agreed Kingsley. “You know how dangerous time travel can be, right?”

“Yes, I know,” said Harry. “But this is my decision, and I think it’s a good one.”

Kingsley held up his hands to emphasize that he wasn’t arguing. “Just making sure. Professor McGonagall was in here a few hours ago. She said you slapped her around a bit.”

“I didn’t want to.”

“I know, and I think she knew. I just want to make sure you know that I’m the last person who’s going to second-guess your decisions. Sometimes I may question you, just to make sure you’ve thought of everything.”

“Fair enough. Well, I’ll be spending most of the next few days talking to people, deciding who’s going to join. Ron and Hermione have already said yes, and Neville’s next on the list. Professor

McGonagall's not going to be happy, but that's the way it goes. I need him more than she does. Maybe there's an ex-Auror or two who'll do it for a few years."

"Maybe so, now that the curse is off the job. I'll talk to some people."

"Okay," said Harry, standing. "I'll be in touch."

Kingsley stood as well. "Thank you, for what you did today. That helps a lot, but there are still former Death Eaters and Dark wizards out there. It won't be easy for a while. But, I suppose there's nothing to be done, but..."

"Keep moving forward," finished Harry. He noted Kingsley's very surprised reaction, and nodded slightly. "See you," he said, and Disapparated.

* * * * *

The next day was very busy, as he imagined most of his days would be for quite a while, or at least until the Aurors were up to full strength and life was calm again. He walked around Diagon Alley, talked to people, and even signed a few autographs, secure in the knowledge that if someone handed him something that was really a Portkey, his ability to see magic would spot it instantly. Nothing untoward happened, however. He did the Pinter interview, caught up on his mail, and the day went by faster than he would have imagined. Later in the day, he went to Hogwarts to request Ginny and Neville's presence for a few hours; McGonagall granted Ginny a few hours' leave, but reminded Harry that as a teacher, Neville could come and go as he pleased. Finally, he visited Luna and requested that she come as well.

He would have dinner with the Weasley family the next night, but this night, on his second full day back, he wanted to eat at Grimmauld Place with his friends, with those who had gone to the Ministry with him that day a little over two years ago. The six of them spent three hours together. Neville agreed to join the new Aurors. Harry asked Ginny as well, who said she was flattered, but wanted a day or two to think it over. All of them had a good time, and it made Harry glad he

had thought of it. We may be busy, he thought, but we need to enjoy our friends, enjoy our time together. Life isn't only work.

After Luna, Neville, and Ginny left, the three main occupants of Grimmauld Place went to the kitchen to clean up. Hermione washed the dishes, Ron dried and put them away, and Harry cleared the table. "You're doing the dishes manually. I'm surprised you haven't learned any household spells yet."

Annoyed, Hermione glanced at him over her shoulder. "Why do I have to? Just because I'm the woman?"

"I was talking to both of you," Harry assured her. "But, you know, the Japanese think that a woman's place is to stay at home, take care of all the household work, raise the children, and so forth." Hermione rolled her eyes, clearly showing what she thought of that.

"So," said Ron, "you mean that the Japanese embrace solid, traditional, old-fashioned values." Amused with himself, he glanced at Hermione for a reaction.

"You'd better watch out, or you'll be washing them as well as drying them," muttered Hermione. Ron grinned.

"We've had this conversation a few times," explained Ron. "She thinks there's something to doing it by hand. Something about not forgetting what manual labor feels like, not relying on magic for everything. Like Mum does."

Now, she was more than a little annoyed. "Don't start with me, Ron," she warned him. "I've said before that I don't blame your mother, especially since she had a huge family to deal with. I don't think everyone has to do it the way I do. It's just the way I want to do it, at least for now. And I did tell you that I don't care if you do it or not. But I know you're just trying to annoy me. God only knows why, though. It's as though you like to fight."

"I don't like to fight," he protested. "Just making jokes."

“Because becoming like Fred and George is such a good thing,” she countered sarcastically.

“So, Harry, are you going to get a new house-elf?” asked Ron.

Harry shrugged. “I wouldn’t have any idea of how to go about getting one. I wonder about that, anyway. Who brings them up, when they’re small? Do their owners keep their kids? Anyway, we’ll see. I might learn a few spells if it becomes necessary. It’s not like I need a house-elf, and I feel bad that now, two house-elves have died saving me. I wish I could thank Kreacher for—”

Harry was startled as suddenly, two things appeared in front of him: what appeared to be a ghost of Kreacher, and a live house-elf. She was young, a little shorter than Dobby or Kreacher, and cute, or at least as cute as house-elves could be seen as by humans. Seeming surprised by her surroundings, she immediately let out what Harry assumed was a squeal of joy. Harry gasped. “Kreacher?”

“Master Harry said Kreacher’s name,” said Kreacher happily. “Master Harry does not know house-elf law, so Kreacher will explain. When a master’s elf dies, a successor is appointed: the young one next in line to be provided to a wizarding home. The old elf’s ghost and the new elf are summoned by saying the old elf’s name in the family home. The young one is Master Harry’s new elf, Kreacher’s replacement.”

Uh, okay, thought Harry, stunned. He asked the first question that came to his mind. “What’s her name?”

“That is Master Harry’s decision,” said Kreacher. “The young elf has no name at this time.”

“Me is so excited, so lucky!” squeaked the elf. “Master is Harry Potter!”

Hermione didn’t look happy. “Harry, are you really going to—”

Harry gave her a sharp look; hurt, she cut herself off. He would explain later, but he didn’t want the new elf to feel rejected, as if he

was considering whether to ship her off. "I'll deal with it," he said to her.

He turned to Kreacher. "Kreacher, I wanted to say thank you for what you did. Without you, I might never have gotten out of there."

Kreacher shook his head. "Kreacher was honored to die for Harry Potter. Kreacher is now legendary elf, and has no regrets. Goodbye, Harry Potter."

"Goodbye, Kreacher," said Harry, as Kreacher's image slowly faded, and finally disappeared. He turned to the new elf, who was still brimming with excitement. "Okay, a name." Something occurred to him quickly, and he decided to go with it. "I'd like your name to be Maria."

Hermione smiled; Ron looked puzzled. "Elves aren't given human names, Harry. Maria's a human name."

"That's the point, Ron," explained Hermione. "Harry—I assume—picked the name to say that he regards her as equal to humans. Isn't that right, Harry?"

"Exactly," he agreed. "So, is Maria okay with you?" he asked the elf.

"Maria! Maria sounds pretty. Maria is very happy," said the delighted elf.

"Good. Maria, there's something I want to tell you, and it's very important." The elf nodded, listening attentively. "I'm not a usual master. I think that house-elves are equal to humans. I know you want to serve me, and I appreciate that. But in addition to doing what you'll do around here, I want you to learn things. For example, can you read English?"

"Of course, Master Harry. It is necessary to go shopping, and—"

"Just a minute. What I'm going to say will sound strange to you, but many things I say will sound strange. This is also very important. You

must not call me 'Master Harry.' You must call me 'Harry.' Do you understand?"

The elf looked hesitant, and a little frightened. "Maria was told always to call the master by 'Master.'"

"Yes, I know, but I am telling you something different. Will you do as I ask?"

"Of course, M—Of course, Harry. Is very difficult, but Maria will try."

"Good. Now, so, you can read. Have you ever read the Daily Prophet, the human newspaper?"

"Oh, no, Mas—Harry. Is not necessary for elves."

"I want you to start reading it, every morning. Not the whole thing, just the front page, at first. Okay?"

"Of course, Maria will do as Master—oh, Maria is sorry! Maria will do as Harry says. But Maria wonders why."

"Good. You should never be afraid to ask why. It's because I'm Auror Leader, and the news will be important for me. It'll be useful for me if you know what is in the paper. At first, I'll explain some things about wizard life so you'll understand what's in the paper. Now, you should walk around the house, get familiar with it so you can start your job. Okay?"

"Yes yes yes! Thank you, Harry. Maria is so happy!" She seemed to bounce out of the room.

Hermione regarded him with approval. "That's a good idea, Harry. I'm not sure I would have thought of it."

"But why the Prophet?" asked Ron.

Harry put up the spell that would guard against eavesdropping. "I want her to learn, to understand the world outside of this home, to think about things. I want to see what she can do. I know it'll take

years, but that's okay. I want her to like me; the more she does, the harder she'll try to do what I say."

"And, you hope, she'll come to the conclusion that house-elves shouldn't be owned," said Hermione.

"Partly, but that may be too much to hope for," said Harry. "But I'm not going to keep it a secret how I treat her. If she starts to think for herself, gets more free will and more human-like, I can show her as an example, like, look what house-elves are capable of if we give them a chance."

"Oh, I really hope so," said Hermione. "It'll be a lot more than I could do at Hogwarts. I was so stupid, thinking I could change things overnight. I didn't accomplish anything."

"That's not true, Hermione. You made me think about it. Do you think I'd be doing this if you hadn't done what you did? I would have just done what most people did. But for now, I think you shouldn't tell her she should want to be free, and not try to help her with housework or anything. She'll take it as you thinking—"

"That she's doing something wrong, I get it. Don't worry, I won't."

"I can't believe how excited she is," put in Ron.

"Well," said Harry, "she is the house-elf of the incredibly wonderful and legendary wizard Harry Potter. No wonder she's excited."

Ron chuckled. "Good to see this Auror Leader stuff isn't going to your head."

"Absolutely not." Harry lifted the anti-eavesdropping spell. "So, you told your mother I'd be over tomorrow night, right?"

"Yep. I think she'll be satisfied with that, if you can make it over every Wednesday. She'd sort of been hinting lately that she hoped that Hermione and I would make it over there more often than once a week."

“Why?” asked Harry.

“Well, I never officially moved out,” said Ron. “We started staying here when the goblins kidnapped you, and then after you left the country, we decided to keep staying, partly because it seemed like the house shouldn’t be left totally empty and unused, and partly because we knew you’d want us to—”

“You were right about that,” agreed Harry.

“But I never said to Mum that I was moving out, exactly. I’d just come over and get more and more of my stuff. I suppose I should tell her at some point.”

“Just to make sure, I hope you know I want you both to keep staying. Of course, soon we’re going to be living on an island in the South Pacific, but still, I’d rather not live here by myself.”

Ron nodded. “We’re happy to. Several reasons, but the most important one is that here, we share a bedroom, but Mum would have had a bit of trouble with that.” Harry grinned at Hermione, who blushed.

“I’ve got no problem with that, needless to say. By the way, that reminds me of something. When Kingsley gave me that test, as you know, I was living with my parents. Horrible as that whole thing was, I did at least in that time get to have a good conversation with each of them, the people they would have been if they’d lived. In the one with my Mum, we were talking about Cho, who was my girlfriend in that thing—”

“Why was Cho your girlfriend?” interrupted Ron. Hermione gave him a ‘don’t ask that’ glance.

“I don’t know,” said Harry. “After it was finished, that wasn’t exactly my biggest concern, but I was surprised too. I’d have thought it would be Ginny.”

“You’re really okay with her and Neville?”

Harry sighed lightly. "I don't have much of a choice, do I? I'm trying to take the high road, because the result is the same no matter which road I take. But no, I saw enough in the visions to know that when I left the country, I lost her for good. Not that I could have done much else; it was just circumstances. I couldn't be there for her, and she couldn't wait for me. By the way, I hope you made up with her."

"What do you mean?"

"That fight you had, after you told her I left the country. It was pretty ugly."

Ron's eyes went wide. "You saw that? In your visions?"

"Yeah. I felt bad for both of you, but I appreciated that your impulse was to defend me."

Ron shrugged. "Just seemed like common sense to me. But yeah, we made up a while back. When I found out she was with Neville, I wasn't thrilled. I mean, I like Neville, you know that. I just..."

Hermione gave Ron a superior grin. "He means that he wishes it had been you."

"Yeah, I got that," smiled Harry. "Thanks. I just hoped there wasn't any long-term damage from that."

"You were saying, Harry?" prompted Hermione. "About your mother?"

"Oh, yeah. I was talking to her about Cho, that we didn't seem to be connecting, that we didn't have so much in common. Of course, there, you two were also together. But Mum said that she'd always kind of hoped that Hermione and I would get together." He saw Hermione and Ron exchange surprised glances. "It was funny that she thought that. I guess it means she liked you," he added, looking at Hermione, who looked as though tears might come to her eyes.

"And that she didn't like me," joked Ron.

“No, just that she liked me more than you,” retorted Harry. More seriously, he added, “Anyway, I told her that I thought you were a good couple, and I was happy for you. She asked if I’d told you that, and I said I hadn’t. She said I should. So, in respect for her memory, I’m saying it now. I think you’re a good couple, and I’m happy for both of you.”

“Oh, thank you, Harry,” gushed Hermione, tears trickling down her cheeks. She walked to Harry and hugged him.

“Thank you,” echoed Ron, clearly emotionally affected.

He patted Hermione’s back as she let go. “Well, it’s just the truth. One thing I learned from the visions was that we should say how we feel, because you never know if you’ll have another chance. Not to be morbid, but I think it makes sense anyway.”

“It does,” agreed Hermione. “But it’s still very sweet of you.”

Harry decided it was time to change the subject. “So, I never did ask you, what have you two been doing work-wise since I left?”

“I helped out with the bank for a while,” said Hermione. “A month or so after you left, Bill started to get it on track, and hire more people. He tried to get me to stay, but that’s not what I want to do. I came in a few more times to help, but once things were settled, there wasn’t much I could do that others couldn’t. And sometimes, like Ron, I helped out his father.”

“Which I’ve been gradually doing less of as well,” added Ron. “There hasn’t been so much to do, though I do check in with the Muggle-borns from time to time to see how they’re doing. But other than that, I’ve been hanging out here, not doing much of anything. Which was good, as it turns out, since I’m now going to be very busy.”

“Well, I had an idea, which would make you even busier, but I’m not sure what you two will think of it. I was thinking that we should write a book.”

“What??” Ron and Hermione chorused; Harry couldn’t help but grin at the unintended coordination of their reactions.

“Yeah, I thought you might say that. Everyone wanted to hear the story of what happened, and I didn’t want to tell it. But the guy at the end of the visions thing said that stories are important, that they inspire people. And for the first time, I sort of understood.

“So, here’s my idea. We write about our Hogwarts years, from the first year Hogwarts Express to the victory over Voldemort. It would be written by all three of us, in our own words. We would each write what happened, from our point of view, and it would be organized to be in order. Like, in second year, Hermione would write about getting together the Polyjuice Potion, then one of us would write about taking it, then Ron or I about going to the Slytherin area and talking to Malfoy. Like that. The story would switch off writers, according to whose words should be next in the story.”

“What makes you think I can write?” asked a surprised Ron.

“It would just be a matter of saying what happened,” said Harry. “It could be edited later. Part of what makes me want to do it, besides the whole story thing I mentioned, is that... I talked to Flourish after I had this idea. I mentioned it to him, and he was practically wetting his pants over the notion of being the one to publish it. Turns out Flourish and Blotts publishes as well as sells books. He said he’s sure it would be the biggest seller the store’s ever had, and it would sell well internationally too. But he also said that now that I’m Auror Leader, a biography on me is bound to come out; it would just be a matter of time. And he said if whoever it is couldn’t interview us, he or she would just do the best they could, and guess at a lot of things, talk to people who were only somewhat involved. Rather than have to say, this was true but that wasn’t, I think it’s best if we just write it ourselves. Then it’s the definitive account. So, what do you think?”

Ron’s eyes lit up. “He said it would be a bestseller? Were any amounts mentioned?”

“Ron!” Hermione admonished him. “The money’s not the reason to do it!”

Harry grinned. "He did mention amounts. He said at the very least, it would sell ten thousand copies in England, at ten Galleons per copy. After publishing expenses, and his profit, we'd be looking at fifteen thousand Galleons each. And he thinks internationally, there'd be at least that much, maybe more."

It was clear to Harry that even Hermione found the money appealing. But he also saw a look of dismay cross her face. "But isn't it the same thing as them paying us for an interview? We'd be making money for what you did."

"I couldn't have done it without you, you know. But it's your story, too; you were just as involved in this stuff as I was."

"But before you answer, there's one thing I want to mention. If we do this, I think we need to do it right, tell the whole story. Meaning that we have to tell everything that happened, honestly, even if some things were embarrassing to us, or make us look bad." He knew he was largely referring to Ron's having run out on them, but didn't want to say it so directly. "Is this something both of you would want to do, even under those conditions?"

Hermione and Ron exchanged a glance; Hermione nodded. Ron looked pensive. "Now, that fifteen thousand Galleons, was he really certain of that, or—"

"Ron!" she admonished him; he chuckled. Annoyed, she pointed a finger at him. "That's not something you want to be doing to me very much,"

"I'll take that as a yes, from both of you," said Harry. "Now, there'll be a couple of things to help us write it. One, I already told you about the artifact I got from Malfoy. I figure we can use that, take turns. We could finish it really fast if we wanted."

"The other thing is that I stopped by the antique shop, to look into getting a Pensieve. They don't have one right now, but they were in contact with someone who had one, and negotiating for it. I should

have it by tomorrow. So, we can use that, and it'll help a lot. We'll be able to use it in the slow-time field, I'm pretty sure."

"I'm sure those things aren't cheap," said Ron. "How much will it be?"

"Twelve hundred Galleons."

"Wow!" exclaimed Ron. "Well, I suppose you can afford it. But yeah, that'd be pretty helpful. By the way... we don't have to include every little detail, do we?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know, like sixth year... I'd really rather not mention You-Know-Who..."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Voldemort?"

"He means Lavender," said Hermione, casting suspicious glances at Ron.

"Well," said Ron defensively, "okay, it's not something I'm especially proud of, and it doesn't have anything to do with Voldemort, so..."

Harry grinned. "It's just nice to hear You-Know-Who mean someone other than Voldemort. But no, I wouldn't think so. I mean, the story should be about our Hogwarts years, especially where we did unusual stuff, and I did plan to write about Cho, for example. But—"

"But then, you didn't embarrass yourself," said Hermione pointedly. Ron rolled his eyes, but didn't respond.

"I think it's more that she embarrassed him," suggested Harry.

"Thank you," said Ron, his tone indicating that Harry had hit the nail on the head. Hermione looked at Ron as though there was a lot she wanted to say, but was refraining, with great difficulty.

She turned her attention to another subject. "So, the book should be divided into seven parts, of course, one for each year... and maybe

the text could be in three different colors, each one to indicate who's talking, or I should say, writing... and we probably shouldn't coordinate our accounts before we write; we might remember things differently, and it might be interesting for the readers..." Harry and Ron exchanged a quick, amused glance. Hermione would clearly be in charge of the production details of the book. Fine with me, thought Harry. He listened to her talk, very pleased to again be in the presence of his two closest friends.

* * * * *

The next week went by very quickly for Harry; there seemed to be a dozen things to do each day. The main issues he concerned himself with were preparing for their trip to the island, and talking to the people he wanted to accompany him. He thought about whether he should take anyone who was interested in becoming an Auror and seemed qualified, but in the end he decided to make it only those he knew and could trust. The others could be trained in the more normal way. Kingsley advised him to reconsider; he felt it could lead to factionalism. The ones who went might consider themselves 'D.A. Aurors' or 'island Aurors,' more important and more connected to Harry than others. Harry thought about it, but after consultation with the Auror Leader portraits, decided to do it his way. The current situation was very unusual, and he didn't want to take someone he didn't know to the island only to find that they weren't suited to be an Auror. Not that he knew 100% that all who would go were, but at least he already knew them, and had confidence in their ability. He ended up with a group of fifteen people who would be going with him, and he implored them all to keep what they would be doing a secret.

Since it didn't cost him any 'real-life time,' he spent a lot of time talking to the Aurors' portraits. He was beginning to realize that this would be a very valuable resource, perhaps the most valuable one the room offered. They knew which books in the library were the most important, they knew spells which had long since fallen into disuse, they had useful suggestions when he brought up a problem, and most of all, they had all had the weight of society on their shoulders, as he now did. So that they could give him better advice as time passed, he carefully filled them in on the current situation and what had led up to it. Despite their badgering, he simply couldn't fill them in

on wizarding history over the past eighty years, but promised to try to get caught up on it. He would have to buy several books on twentieth century wizarding history, read them in that room, and then tell them about it. He had to agree with one former Leader who pointed out that he would benefit greatly in his new role by knowing such information. When he responded that there were no doubt a great many things he didn't know that he would benefit by knowing, the Leader responded, "Yes, exactly." Unhappily, Harry had to admit that he was right. He had one very long conversation with them about training Aurors, something which was of great interest to him at the time.

To his great surprise, five days after he had talked to them about the book, Ron and Hermione reported that they had both finished their parts. That Hermione had done so didn't surprise him, but Ron's effort did; he was further surprised to hear Ron say that once he started, he really 'got into it,' and had finished sooner than Hermione. Harry had to admit that he hadn't gotten far on his, and told them he'd finish it soon. The next day, he did the work in several very long stretches in the Auror Leader room, and gave it to Hermione for editing. Again using Malfoy's device, she finished it within a day, and delivered it to an ecstatic Flourish. Harry knew everyone would think he and they had worked on it over the past three months, and he planned to do nothing to change that impression.

As he had in the 'other reality' of the Auror Leader test, he made sure to tour Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade every day, letting people see his face and get used to him being around. He slowly learned who had something to say and who tended to bend his ear for no good reason. He also made his way through Knockturn Alley, knowing he needn't worry about being ambushed by magic he could see coming. He wanted to get to know the bartenders and shop owners on the seedier side as well, knowing they could be good sources of information, or good people to keep an eye on. Even they, to his surprise, tended to praise and celebrate him as did most people, and his new ability told him that most were being sincere.

The day after he finished his work on the book, he was making his way through Diagon Alley when a paper airplane appeared in front of him. Recalling the earlier paper airplane incident, he was glad that he could see whether it was a Portkey, and this wasn't. He opened it to

read that it was from Kingsley, requesting his presence as soon as possible. Shrugging, he Apparated to Kingsley's office.

To his great surprise, he was across the desk from Kingsley, and face to face with Kaz; his face lit up. "Kaz! What are you—oh, they let you leave the country?" Harry extended his hand, which Kaz shook.

"The Minister has been very helpful," said Kaz. "It's good to see you again."

"You too," said Harry. "So, what happened after—"

Kingsley cleared his throat. "Sorry, but I will need my office. Why don't you two use the adjoining room. It's soundproofed from here, so you can talk freely."

Harry nodded, and he and Kaz went to the other room and took seats on the sofa. "I wanted to talk to you before I left," said Harry. "But they wouldn't let me leave the Satos' house before I left the country. I assume you had a similar situation."

"I was little angry, to be honest," said Kaz; Harry realized that he wasn't wearing the translator, so Kaz would have to rely on his English. "I expected them to be more grateful, after doing that. It wasn't my reason, but still, they treated me like criminal. You too?"

"Less bad than you, but yes. I'm surprised they let you leave the country."

"Me too. Before I left, Sato talked to me. He spoke very honestly; I was surprised. Said he was grateful, many Japanese were grateful, but Minister had personal problem. He said Minister would not accept me back to Japanese society, but making me ronin again was a politics problem. He said my choice was to be ronin, or to leave the country."

"I can understand why you'd choose that," agreed Harry. "But why here and not America? Or are you just visiting?"

Kaz looked embarrassed. "I came here because you are very kind, I think England is good place. But also... I heard about your Aurors, what happened. You are making new Aurors. I... I am pretty good at magic, did well at tactical school. I hope I can join your Aurors." He said it with the air of someone who was sure he was asking too much, but hoped for a good response anyway.

Harry didn't try to hide his surprise. "Wow. But this isn't your home country, so why would you want to be an Auror here?"

"I tried to save Japanese lives; it was my country, even though I was ronin. Japan was not your country, but you risk your life anyway. I understood that people's country doesn't matter; people are people. If I can help your people, I will be happy."

Harry was impressed; he was sure that Kaz was being truthful and sincere. Grinning, he said, "I think a lot of Japanese wouldn't agree that a person's country doesn't matter."

Kaz grinned in response. "Yes, very true."

More seriously, Harry said, "I understand, and I know you mean it. But there's one question I have to ask, which I normally wouldn't ask..."

Kaz understood. "Chieko." Harry nodded; Kaz looked very serious. "I was happy she visited, but I always thought nothing could happen. Maybe I was selfish, but it was better than having nothing. I had no plan to leave her; I mean I always was sure she would leave me sometime.

"After last week, Aurors looked in my mind, asked me questions when I was sleeping. Found out her, told her parents and... high family person..."

"Patriarch," supplied Harry.

"Patriarch, thank you. She was in big trouble, of course. Said she might be ronin. They let her see me. She said... very sorry, but doesn't want to be ronin. I asked if she would come to England with

me. She said, very sorry, but too difficult to leave Japan, doesn't want to leave family, and society. I understood. We said goodbye."

Harry winced; he could imagine what Kaz had felt. "I'm really sorry."

Kaz nodded, and gave a little shrug. "Sho ga nai," he said; it was a phrase Harry had heard a lot, which roughly meant, 'there was nothing that could be done.' "You know 'sho ga nai', right?"

Harry chuckled. "You can't live in Japan for three months and not know that. I was going to say that you came to the place where people don't have to gaman, but Aurors do sometimes have to gaman."

"I may not be a normal Japanese, but I can gaman," said Kaz. "Mmmm, maybe not, since I got angry and broke my..."

"Antiquity Link," supplied Harry.

"Antikity Link," repeated Kaz poorly. "Difficult word, in English. So, maybe I don't gaman so well. But other times, pretty well. Probably, better than most English."

"Probably," agreed Harry. "Anyway, about your question... you know that Aurors have to risk their life, maybe even have to give their life, in doing their job. That's okay with you?"

"I tell you a secret. My name, Hirokazu, usually Japanese call Hiro as nickname. In America, I said, call me Hiro. I didn't know that sounds like English word 'hero,' and American friends said like, 'he's a hero.' I didn't like that, because once in America, I saw someone in trouble, and could have helped, but didn't. I felt bad, like, not brave. After that, people stopped to make 'hero' jokes. So, when I met you, said my name is 'Kaz,' because didn't want you to make 'hero' joke."

"I wouldn't have. People do say I'm a hero, but I don't like that. I'd be the last person to make a joke like that. But I guess you couldn't know that."

“Now I know, of course,” agreed Kaz. “I am not a hero, but am glad I did the right thing that night. Don’t worry about the joke anymore, but decided I like ‘Kaz’ better. Stronger sound, so I will use that. Anyway, after that night, I feel more... believe in myself. I believe I can be Auror, risk my life.”

Harry nodded, and paused for a minute, thinking. He didn’t doubt Kaz’s bravery, but there was more to being an Auror than bravery. He didn’t want to discourage him, but didn’t want to build up his hopes either.

“I understand, and I appreciate your offer. To be honest, choosing an Auror is a big responsibility, and I have to be very careful. I will consider you, and I will give you a chance to prove that you should be able to join. But, not yet. To be an Auror, you have to be fluent in the language, and you have to understand the country, the culture, the values. I don’t know how long that will take you. Maybe a year, maybe two. When that happens, I will seriously consider it. Do you understand?”

Kaz nodded. “Thank you, Harry. I know I cannot do it right now, and you are right about the language. Of course, I will study hard.”

Harry could easily believe that. “Where will you be staying?”

“I arrived today, so I do not know.”

“Well, I have an idea about that...”

* * * * *

Later that evening, to Harry’s surprise, he got another summons, to meet another Japanese person. He entered the Foreign Ministry offices at a little after ten p.m., and greeted the visitor with a smile. “Sato-san, it’s good to see you again.” They shook hands.

Also smiling, Sato looked over Harry’s crimson Auror robe. “You, too. It looks very good on you.” As they sat in a lounge, Sato added, “You should feel free to call me ‘Kenichi,’ as we are now operating by your

cultural norms, and in your country, you are several levels higher rank than I.”

With an impish smile, Harry responded, “I appreciate your saying that, Sato-san.”

Sato chuckled. “As you wish. I hesitated to disturb you, as I have nothing of great importance to say, just news that I thought would be of some interest to you.”

“I’m happy to talk to you, even if there’s nothing of importance to say.”

“It’s very kind of you; I know how busy you are right now. First of all, I don’t know if you have met Harada-san yet, but—“

“I talked to him earlier. For a while, at least, he’s going to be a houseguest at the Weasleys’. It somehow seems right. He was surprised they let him leave the country, and so am I. I guess that part of the reason was that for Minister Morishita, just making him ronin again would be seen as ungrateful?”

“Partly,” answered Sato. “But it is also rumored that the Minister actively hoped that Harada-san would leave the country, because he feared that many grateful Japanese would seek him out, though he was ronin—remember, doing so is not technically illegal—to thank him, and get his story, which does not reflect well on the Minister. Out of the country, he is no such threat.”

Harry sighed. “Human nature, I guess.”

“Indeed; that the Minister would react so is hardly unique to Japan, I suspect. But while the news media has still been silent on the matter, rumors are swirling; some say that even the Aurors are leaking the truth of what happened. In his personal unhappiness, the Minister has inaccurately gauged the response of society to his ungrateful actions, and society is reacting in typical Japanese fashion: behind the scenes, with no bold proclamations, but with everyone understanding what is truly happening. It is expected that the Minister will resign within a few weeks; you may well be invited to Japan to attend some ceremony to honor your actions, after a new Minister takes over.”

It wasn't something Harry wanted to do, but he didn't strenuously object, either. He was tempted to say that he wouldn't do it unless Kaz was also invited, but decided to wait until it became an issue. "I understand."

After a short silence, Sato went on, "It may amuse you to know that Yasunori requested, far more vigorously than is normal for him, to accompany me here. I felt it was inappropriate, as I have diplomatic credentials and he does not."

"Just so you know, I'm pretty sure I can guarantee that if he were to come, the English government would have no objections."

Sato smiled a little. "Given all that has happened recently, I suspect that nothing you wished for would be impossible. But I am sure you know I mean that our government would not allow it. In any case, he sends his regards, and asked me to tell you that, as a direct eyewitness to the events of that night, he has gained a great deal of social currency. Even older students have asked to hear his account."

"Wow. When I first got there that wouldn't have surprised me at all, but now, of course, I know how strange that is. Please tell him that even though I'm super-busy, I still miss him. Tell him, and have him tell the others, that getting the information about the dementors required a lot of gaman. But it wasn't the pain kind; it was the stubborn kind, which I really prefer. Oh, and that reminds me, there was something I got for them. Just a minute, I'll be right back."

He Disapparated to his bedroom, then Apparated back a few seconds later, carrying a long, thin bag. He handed it to Sato. "Please give these to Yasunori, and have him give two to Yusuke and Yosuke. I was walking around Diagon Alley, saw these in a shop, and thought of them."

Sato reached into the bag, pulled out one of the three umbrellas, and chuckled. "I recall the day you were talking about this, when it rained all day. I'm sure this will give them a good laugh."

"Well, I hope they use them, too. They're nice umbrellas."

"I have no doubt that they will. The other thing I wanted to do was to give you an update on the status of the Antiquity Link. Discussion is proceeding; in a breakthrough of sorts, the newspaper reported yesterday for the first time that, according to the testimony of several dozen honored spirits, the Antiquity Link does not allow them to move on even if they wish to do so. You already knew this, so it may not seem so surprising, but most citizens—including our family, until that night—did not know, and it is quite a shock. Nothing will happen instantly, but this will hasten discussion about what steps to take."

"That's good," said Harry. "Frankly, I'm surprised that the Minister allowed that to be published."

"As was I," agreed Sato. "We—that is, people at the office—speculate that the newspaper published it without informing him, which would also be a sign that he is on the way out. Normally, the Minister would be consulted before such an incendiary revelation is made in those pages. It suggests that the newspaper's editors have lost confidence in him as someone who will make the judgments best for Japanese society."

"In any case, I have spoken to all my ancestors, and they insist that the Antiquity Link is not a hardship for them. Unfortunately, they have chosen not to participate in the discussion among the honored spirits, saying that the whole problem was caused only by a few malcontents. I pushed as hard as I could, much harder than I normally would, for them to be honest, and they insisted that they were. The problem for us is that if we push too hard for them to tell us their true opinion, it causes it to seem as though we are accusing them of lying, and it runs the risk of causing offense, as we are younger and should not be so bold. I am sure you can see the difficulty."

Harry nodded sadly. "Unfortunately, yes. Funny how I know Japanese culture well enough to understand that, but I do. I guess, like Fred said, change is going to have to come from within the Link. But change for your generation, and Yasunori's, that's still for you to decide."

“It is a very difficult question,” said Sato thoughtfully. “It is my hope that a modified version of the Link can be found, so that those who wish to stay can do so easily, but those who do not wish to stay can move on. But, if nothing can be found before I pass on...” With a gleam in his eye, he concluded, “I will gaman.”

Harry laughed. “I wouldn’t expect anything else.”

* * * * *

Five days later, everything was finally ready. The transportation, the portable shelters, the food and other supplies, and the magical equipment that was necessary for Auror training. They would leave the next day, go back in time one year, and focus on training. Hermione had overseen the gathering of a small library of books to take with them.

After talking to a few dozen people, Harry had settled on sixteen people to take. All except two had said they were interested in becoming Aurors. One was Luna, of course; the other was George Weasley. He hadn’t promised to be a full-time Auror, but did allow for the possibility that if someone trustworthy could be found to tend the shop, he might yet become one. In the end, Harry had decided to take him anyway; partly because he was a Weasley, and partly because even if he couldn’t be an Auror full-time, he could be part-time, available for special situations.

Except for Harry, Kingsley, and Hestia, the group included: Hermione, Ron, Luna, Ginny, Neville, Dean, Seamus, George, Parvati, Padma, Michael Corner, Terry Boot, Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Lee Jordan, and Angelina Johnson. Each had been sworn to tell no one that they were going back in time; their families had only been told that they had been recruited as Aurors, and would embark on special training. Harry regretted that Fred couldn’t join them, but he couldn’t go back in time, as he was a ghost.

There was one last thing Harry wanted to do before leaving, something he’d been thinking about since accepting the mantle of Auror Leader and deciding on the unorthodox training setting. He had set the night, and made sure everyone involved could attend. He had

asked Aberforth to close the place to the public just for the night, and paid a generous fee for the privilege.

One by one or in pairs, they walked or Apparated in: the founding members of Dumbledore's Army. When everyone had arrived, only three were not there who had been there on that day nearly three years ago: Marietta Edgecombe, Zacharias Smith, and Colin Creevey. One who was there now had not been then: Seamus Finnegan, who Harry felt had done enough to fight Voldemort at Hogwarts to earn the right to attend tonight. Fred, naturally, was in attendance.

They ate, talked, exchanged stories of the Hogwarts Resistance, and exulted in their victory. Dennis Creevey drank some firewhiskey, and no one, not even Hermione, told him he shouldn't. He realized it, of course, when soon after he burped loudly and a three-inch flame came out of his mouth. Everyone laughed heartily, and Seamus promptly nicknamed him 'Dennis the Dragon.' Luna and Cho spent some time talking, to Harry's surprise.

Neville and Seamus engaged in a 'duel' in which each spell was sillier than the last; Neville turned Seamus's clothes pink, and Seamus responded by making Neville's ears five times their normal size. The duel ended with Neville doing a theatrical spell that seemed to have no effect; asked by Dean what the spell had done, Neville responded, "He'll find out the next time he goes to the loo." As everyone laughed, Seamus, overacting somewhat, pretended to look down his pants, and put on an expression of shock and dismay. This display got most of the alcohol-fueled onlookers laughing hysterically. Harry laughed as well, happy that he'd had the idea. Maybe we should make this a yearly thing, he thought.

After another hour, the food had been eaten, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat in exactly the same positions they had three years ago. Harry remembered how uncomfortable he'd felt, and how angry he'd been with Hermione for roping him into doing something he hadn't wanted to do. Spurred by the thought, he put an arm around her shoulder and leaned close to whisper into her ear. "I want to thank you for making me do this three years ago."

She chuckled. "I seem to recall you wanting to bite my head off then."

“Yeah, well, I was irritable the whole year,” he half-joked; he knew it was a great understatement. “Right now, I’m very glad.”

She put an arm around him and squeezed. “I’m glad you’re glad.”

Curious, Ron leaned over. “What are you two glad about?”

Harry patted Ron on the back. “Being here tonight.”

Ron nodded. “It’s been quite a journey, from the first day of the Hogwarts Express. I’ve enjoyed every minute of it.”

Harry grinned. “What a huge liar you are.”

Ron laughed. “Well, okay, maybe not every minute... but most of them.”

After they chatted for a few more minutes, Harry raised his voice and spoke. “Excuse me, I’d like everyone to come over here, pull over some chairs. Sit in the same places you were three years ago.”

People continued talking and laughing as chairs scraped against the wooden floor. “So, what’s all this about you having seen You-Know-Who come back?” joked Corner. “What did you see? We deserve to know!”

Still standing, Neville replied, “You want to know what happened to him? Here’s what happened to him!” His eyes took on a glazed expression, and keeping his body straight, he fell backwards, hitting the floor with a hard thud, slightly louder than it had been at Hogwarts due to the different flooring. The room erupted in laughter and cheers. “Ow, that hurt!” he exclaimed as Ginny reached out and helped to pull him up.

“Probably hurts less,” shouted Seamus, “if you’re already dead when you hit the ground!”

“I’ll keep that in mind for next time,” grinned Neville.

“Anyway,” said Ron loudly, “the reason we’re here is that the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor is teaching us absolutely nothing!”

“Hey, I resent that!” retorted Neville. “And you haven’t been to class anyway, you slacker!”

Harry laughed again, along with the others; he wouldn’t have guessed that Neville had such a flair for comedy. He was about to speak, but was cut off.

“Speaking of Umbridge,” said Cho, “what did you say to her, anyway? You talk to her privately, then almost as soon as she walks out of St. Mungo’s, she resigns her undersecretary position? Was that a coincidence?”

In the spirit of the evening, Harry shrugged. “I just told her I hoped she would get better soon.” Greeted with chuckling and scoffing, he continued, “I might have said a few other words, like ‘repentance’... and ‘resignation...’” Laughter and cheers greeted that word. “And,” Harry continued, “Azkaban...” The laughter increased dramatically. “Yes, yes, yes!” shouted Lee Jordan.

Harry waited for the revelry to die down, then spoke again. “Okay. The first thing I want to do is say a few words about Colin Creevey, who was told not to fight, then came back and did so anyway. Maybe he shouldn’t have; if he hadn’t, he would be here now.” Harry saw Dennis looking especially somber. “But I know that wasn’t how he wanted to live his life; like all of us, he wanted to do his part. But in a battle like that, there’s a lot of luck involved, and he got unlucky. We really wish he could be here today, to enjoy this moment with us. So, let’s have a moment of silence for Colin.”

There was total silence for about a minute, and Harry spoke again. “Okay. Now, the last thing I wanted to talk about tonight was—“

“Hey, just a minute,” demanded Fred. “Why no moment of silence for me?”

A few people chuckled. “Oh, come on,” retorted George. “If there was one for you, you’d just make a joke in the middle of it.”

“And in view of my sacrifice, should I be denied that opportunity?”

Harry smiled. “All right. Do you really want a moment of silence, Fred?”

“No, no, no,” pouted Fred, in his best martyr’s tone. “Don’t worry about me, I’ll be all right.”

“Good,” said George. “Harry, you may continue.”

“Anyway... I recall how three years ago, I didn’t want to talk about what had happened with Voldemort, when he came back. It was pretty traumatic, and it was hard to deal with it in general, never mind talking about it. When I finally did give that interview—at Hermione’s urging; she seems to be the one to tell me to do things I don’t really want to do—it was still pretty difficult, but I realized that people had to know that he was back.

“Then, after—wait, first, I want to apologize for not telling you what I was doing, when we came back to Hogwarts that last night. I know it might have seemed like I didn’t trust you, but it wasn’t even close to that. I did, and do, trust you, all of you. It was partly that Dumbledore told me not to tell anyone but Ron and Hermione, and partly that the explanation was pretty long; I would’ve had to explain a lot of other things also, and there wasn’t time.

“But recently, I realized that probably the biggest reason was that I was used to keeping things to myself. My whole life, people were curious about me, asked me lots of questions, sometimes very personal questions, wrote about me, and so forth... it made me feel like I shouldn’t talk, it was my way of protecting myself. It was just something I got used to doing. Sometimes I didn’t even tell Ron and Hermione things, and if I didn’t, I always regretted it. In the last few months, especially the last few weeks, I started to realize what I’d been doing, and why I’d been doing it.

“Someone told me recently that stories are important, that they inspire people. I had never thought of it that way before, because no one told me stories when I was very young. But I could see that it

made sense. And Aberforth said that stories are a bartender's stock in trade. It may seem like common sense to many of you, but like I said, it just never entered my mind. After Voldemort died, practically everyone wanted to know the story, what had happened in the past year. I didn't want to tell it, again, I think mostly because of that habit, that reflex.

"I know that when you have a fear of something, sometimes the best way to get over it is to jump into it with both feet. So, in that spirit, I decided that Ron, Hermione, and I should write a book about our time at Hogwarts." This prompted quite a few surprised glances. "The good, the bad, the happy, the traumatic, all of it. To be honest, I'm not sure what a person would learn from my story, from our story, but I know that from where I sit, it may be hard to see. So, I'll let the reader decide that.

"The book is finished, and is being published now. They did a test run today, and they're checking it to make sure it prints as it should. For the next few days they'll be checking it, and then they start the main print run." He reached behind him, and picked up a large, thick book. "It's pretty big; it's over seven hundred pages." The D.A. members looked very impressed. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had told the Flourish and Blotts editors that they should feel free to suggest edits, but to Harry's surprise, they didn't want to change a single word, even poor grammar; they wanted it to read exactly as written by the three of them. Of course, Hermione had already altered most of Harry and Ron's poor grammar.

"What I wanted to do now is... because we were a group at Hogwarts, an important group and one that made a lot of difference in beating Voldemort... I wanted you to be the first to hear stuff from this. So, Ron, Hermione, and I are going to read a page or two from each of our sections of the book. We might do this in public on the day the book comes out, but we're going to read different parts, less... personal than the ones we'll read here. Ron?"

He handed the book to Ron, who found the first page he had bookmarked. "Before I start, I just want to mention that doing this wasn't easy for me, especially at first. Part of doing this is writing about what I was feeling at times, and as Hermione knows, that's

never been one of my strong points. But once I started, it got easier, and it turned out to be pretty... what was the word you said?" he asked Hermione.

"Cathartic."

"Yeah, that's it. I feel like I got it out of my system."

Harry nodded. "I think we all felt like that, at the end."

Ron started reading, first choosing a section that explained the locket, pausing to explain to those assembled what a Horcrux was, and why it was important to obtain and destroy them. He then read his account of the fight between him and Harry that led to his departure, then his encounter with the Snatchers.

Not having the locket anymore, not being near it, my head started to clear. Right away I regretted that I'd gone, and wanted to get back, but the Snatchers and the splinching made that impossible.

It was definitely the biggest regret of my life, the thing I most wished I could take back. I tried to tell myself that it wasn't really me, that it was what was inside that locket, the Horcrux. But I couldn't understand why the Horcrux seemed to affect me more than Harry or Hermione. It was no fun for them, either, definitely. But I seemed to have the worst reactions. Was I just weaker than them? More susceptible for some unknown, magical reason? I thought about that a lot over the next few weeks.

Sometimes I blamed Harry. In the argument we had, he practically dared me to do it, so it was easy to say that it was at least partly his fault. But that didn't make me feel any better. In one stupid moment, I had given up this quest, the thing that I'd been willing to risk my life for, and to allow the girl I loved to risk her life for. The quest that could save our society. But even though I felt bad for that, I felt worse for having let down Harry and Hermione. They were my two best friends, the two most important people in my life. Knowing that I had done that hurt worst of all, and I couldn't feel better again until I found a way to rejoin them.

“I’m skipping ahead,” Ron said to the D.A. members, “to later, when I was finally able to find Harry, and you saw in the scene at the Merlin ceremony that I jumped into that pond to save Harry. This is from after that.” He read the account of his encounter with the visions from the Horcrux, and then:

I finally realized why the Horcrux had been weighing us down all that time, and why it had weighed me down more than them. Inside that locket was a piece of Voldemort, literally, full of evil and malevolence. Naturally, one of the things it would do most strongly is amplify your self-doubt, your insecurities. When the locket was closed, it was more on a subconscious level. But when it was open, it really had at you. I realized that I had more insecurities and less self-confidence than Harry and Hermione, and the Horcrux told me exactly what they were; I hadn’t even realized it that much myself until then. We try to put our darkest fears out of our minds, but here it was staring me in the face. Of course, I’d had the feeling before—especially during the Triwizard tournament—that I was just Harry’s sidekick. He never did anything to make me feel like that, though, so it wasn’t so bad. But the other thing... I had only thought once or twice that Harry and Hermione might like each other more than me; I think that the Horcrux dug that one up and really went with it, because the idea was so devastating. Evil knows what weapons hurt most.

Even though I was freezing and wet, and pretty messed up mentally from what the Horcrux had shown me before I was finally able to kill it, I was very, very happy at the same time. When Harry hugged me, it seemed as though all the stress, all the doubt, all the times I’d sworn at myself just fell away, disappeared. I’d been able to save Harry’s life, and I’d been able to overcome my fears enough to kill that Horcrux. When he hugged me, I knew it meant he had forgiven me, and that was the best gift I’d ever gotten. I wasn’t sure whether I deserved his forgiveness, but I would definitely take it. But Hermione’s forgiveness, I soon found out, was much slower in coming.

“Which was very understandable,” put in Hermione sternly.

Ron, who had closed the book, opened it again, and pretended to look for the spot he’d last read. “Which was very understandable,” he repeated, as if he had written it in the book. The D.A. members

laughed, as did Harry. Hermione gave him a 'very funny' look, and tried not to smile.

"All right, that was it for my bit," said Ron, handing the book to Hermione; he was surprised when the small audience applauded, including Fred, though his hands could make no noise. "It's very good, Ron," said Ginny. "Amazingly honest."

He smiled. "Yeah, I didn't know I had it in me."

Hermione opened the book to her bookmarked page, explaining that this was the point at which she and Ron had found out about the Horcruxes.

As soon as I heard what a Horcrux was and how they worked, the realization came to me in an instant: Harry was a Horcrux. I had absolutely no doubt of it; it explained so many things. It explained why he was a Parseltongue, why he had visions of what Voldemort was seeing and feeling, why he got splitting headaches when Voldemort was angry or emotional, why he was always so angry and irritable in fifth year; Voldemort was trying to put visions in his head, so there was more contact, which was bad for Harry. I never doubted for a minute that this was the case.

Which, of course, led to the conclusion that before Voldemort could die, Harry had to, since all the Horcruxes had to be destroyed. I refused to seriously consider that possibility, and focused my thoughts around the notion that there must be some other way, some way to kill the Horcrux without killing Harry. I knew the information I needed wouldn't be in any library; I just had to pray that it would providentially come our way.

I wondered, of course, whether Harry had realized this; I prayed he hadn't. It seemed obvious to me, but I knew that not everyone's mind worked the same, and he truly might not know. Or, he might know; one thing I knew about Harry was that he could be very close-mouthed about some things, and if he worked this out, he probably wouldn't say anything to me or Ron about it. I resolved to keep an eye on him, look for clues that he might do something about it, particularly when we started to get most of the Horcruxes taken care

of. I didn't say anything to Ron about Harry being a Horcrux, because I didn't want him to worry.

It wasn't a hard decision for me or Ron to go with Harry, to do what he had to do. It just had to be done, and we knew it might mean our deaths, or worse, the death of only one of us. But we needed to do it for the wizarding world, and we needed to do it for Harry. He didn't ask to be the Boy Who Lived, or for the stuff that happened to him. But he was stuck with it, and needed our help.

Hermione moved to a page near the end of the book. "This is during the Hogwarts battle, while Harry was off in the forest."

I was with the Weasleys, mourning Fred's death, doing anything I could to help, which I knew was almost nothing. After a while, it suddenly occurred to me that Harry wasn't with us. We'd gone on ahead, and I'd assumed that he would join us. I started looking around, but couldn't find him. I was panicking, realizing what he must have done.

After asking everyone if they'd seen him, I finally found Neville. He said he'd seen Harry ten minutes before, and that Harry had said he had to go do something by himself. I cringed, because I had a strong suspicion what that was. I couldn't be sure, of course, but what else could it be? Maybe he had found a clue or thought of something that led him down another path; after all, Ron and I had gone to the Chamber without him. But I was almost sure I was right.

I thought of going after him, and I almost did. But what if I was wrong? Then I would just be walking into death, for no good reason. And even if I was right, I might be too late... and if I wasn't too late, and could find Harry, he would push me away, insist he had to do it. I doubted he would listen to me, and it would increase the chances of both of us getting killed. I decided not to mention it to Ron, either, as he'd want to rush off into the forest, I knew. With great difficulty, I restrained myself, and tried to focus on helping wounded people.

Then we saw the Dark wizards, led by Voldemort, appear at the gate, and I thought my worst fears were confirmed. Harry was dead. I felt as though the bottom had dropped out of my life. I was desperately

sad, I was furious, but most of all I felt guilty, because I felt I should have stopped it. We were getting close, and I should have known that especially with Voldemort out there taunting Harry to go to the forest, he might do it. But it just hadn't occurred to me, and I was convinced that everything that had happened was my fault. In hindsight, I feel it was somewhat egocentric of me to think that, but in the pressure of the moment, that was what went through my mind.

She turned a few pages of the book, then continued:

After Neville very bravely stood up to Voldemort, and killed Nagini, I knew that Harry had walked to his death, because there was no other way Neville could have known to kill the snake. I was still horrified at what I had allowed to happen, but I knew that now all the Horcruxes were gone, so the only thing to do was to honor Harry's sacrifice and kill Voldemort, finish the job.

When Harry stood up and started to duel Voldemort, I was shocked. How had he survived? I was too entranced by the conversation between them to think about it. I found out soon after the duel, when Harry explained it in the headmaster's office. I was so proud of him, because he always tried to do what he thought was right. But though I was proud, even more I was happy, because my dear friend had survived.

As I have written, Harry and I were never interested in each other romantically. But all the same, I love him immensely. He's not a superhuman figure, and I've seen him at his best and his worst. He has his faults, just like everybody. But a more loyal friend you will never find, and he cares deeply about those close to him. He's been a close companion for seven years, and I hope, many more to come.

He never liked being called 'The Boy Who Lived.' But after unflinchingly looking death in the face a number of times, after facing the most powerful and evil Dark wizard of the century and coming out on top, I think it would not be going too far to call him, 'The Man Who Lived.' He might not like it, but it still fits.

She closed the book and put it aside. As the audience again applauded, she and Harry reached out to each other for a hug. Harry held her tightly and whispered, "Thank you. I love you, too."

"I know," she said through tears as they let go.

Harry took the book and looked up his page. "I must not be very clever," he joked, "because unlike Hermione, it never occurred to me that I was a Horcrux. Now, of course, if you look at it, it makes perfect sense, and I have no idea why I didn't see it then. But it's probably just as well that I didn't, because it would have been hard to put the idea that I was going to end up dead out of my mind." He looked at the book, and read his recollections of what he had seen in the Pensieve, of Snape's last memories. Then:

I knew I had to go out into the forest; it was so obvious that I never even questioned it. After it was all over, someone I know told me that it was stupid of me to have gone out there without even thinking about what alternatives there might have been. I couldn't totally say he was wrong, but at the time, I felt in my bones that it was the right thing to do, the only thing to do. As if it was a truth that need not be questioned. That's not to say I couldn't have been wrong, but that was how it felt.

Even though I knew I had to do it, it was no less terrifying. Anybody who thinks I wasn't scared is kidding himself. I felt like a puppet on a string, someone who had never had a shot at a real life, and now never would, as though my whole life had been planned out from the beginning and this was the conclusion. In addition to the fear, I had a moment of feeling like a five-year-old, saying 'this isn't fair.' No, life isn't fair. But it seemed extremely unfair at that moment. I went to all this trouble to try to get rid of Voldemort, and then I learn that when it happens, I won't be around to enjoy it.

Harry then read about the conversation with Neville, then looked up at him. "Sorry I lied, Neville. But I think you know why I couldn't tell you the truth."

“You mean,” said Neville, “because I would have tackled you and sat on you, and shouted for help to make sure you didn’t go anywhere?” A few D.A. members chuckled.

“Um... I was actually thinking, because if I tried to say it I would lose the courage to go, but yes, that works too.” He read again:

Then as I walked away, I saw Ginny helping someone who’d been wounded. That was when it hit me the hardest that I wouldn’t be coming back. I wanted to stop, to say something to her. If I could have had a last kiss, I might have taken it. But it came crashing down around me that I had to separate myself from this, all of it. And in that moment, I felt separated from her, as if I had broken up with her all over again, but this time for good. I had to tell myself I didn’t care, even though I did. But I was dead already, and what can you do? That was that. I managed to walk on without saying anything.

After this was all over, I had a sense of not wanting to do anything, not knowing what I wanted to do with my future, be it job, relationship, or any sort of commitment to anything. It took me a long time to realize that what had happened at this point was the reason why. I’d guess that knowing you’re going to die is a big psychological shock. It might have different effects on different people, but with me, the effect was that I wanted to isolate myself and avoid commitments, because part of me still felt as though I were dead. It just took some time for me to realize that I could come back to the land of the living. In writing this story, I realize that this is the point when that happened.

He put the book down, to applause, and saw tears running down Ginny’s face. She stood, then he did; she walked to him and hugged him.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

He shook his head. “Not your fault.”

Wiping her eyes, she sat back down next to Neville and took his hand in hers. Harry took it as her wordless assurance to him that however bad she felt for Harry, nothing would change between her and Neville.

“Lastly,” announced Hermione, “we want to read the dedications.” She picked up the book and turned it to one of the first pages and read:

I, Hermione Granger, dedicate this story to: Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and my parents, who I hope and pray will read this story and understand why I did what I did.

She handed the book to Ron, who gave her a one-armed hug and kissed her on the cheek. He read:

I, Ron Weasley, dedicate this story to: Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, and the Weasley family: Arthur, Molly, Bill, Charlie, Percy, Fred, George, and Ginny. Every last member of my family joined this fight.

Harry took the book, and read:

I, Harry Potter, dedicate this story to: Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, and:

To Albus Dumbledore, an imperfect but deeply caring man who did the best he could with what he had.

To Severus Snape, a brave man who managed to find a reason to do the right thing.

To Kingsley Shacklebolt, who after this fight was over, took on the equally hard fight of rebuilding society in a way we can all be proud of.

To Xenophilius Lovegood, a very kind but deeply wounded man, from whom I learned that doing the right thing is often harder than it looks.

To Luna Lovegood, whose spirit is peaceful but indomitable; may she never stop believing in Crumple-Horned Snorkacks.

To Sirius Black and Remus Lupin, friends of my father’s who became friends of mine, and looked after me well,

And to my parents, Lily and James Potter.

Hermione took the book back, and read once more:

We, Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger, dedicate this book:

To the members of Dumbledore's Army, without whom the fight could not have been won, and who provided support when it was needed most.

To everyone, including humans, house-elves, and centaurs, who fought in the Battle of Hogwarts.

And to everyone in wizarding society who took a risk to oppose the darkness that spread over our country.

She put down the book a last time; all of the D.A. members stood, some coming forward to hug or shake hands with Harry, Hermione, or Ron. Luna, who Harry could tell had recently shed tears, hugged him tightly, saying, "Thank you for what you said about me, but even more for what you said about my father. That meant so much to me." Harry nodded and kissed her on the cheek.

He ended up accepting thanks and hugs or handshakes from every D.A. member there. Neville found him, and gave him a hug. "I'm sorry, Harry."

Harry knew what he meant. "Like I said, not your fault, not her fault. It's just life. I'll be all right. Now, I'll be relying on you, to help out with the Aurors. They'll be following your example."

Neville gave him an embarrassed grin. "I think it's more like we'll all be following your example, but I understand. Don't worry, Harry. I'll do my best. We all will."

Harry patted Neville on the shoulder. "I know."

He was about to raise his voice to ask for attention, to remind the new Aurors that they would be meeting at the Ministry at 6:00 p.m. the next day to begin the process of moving to their new, temporary

home. But he saw two dozen people talking, smiling, joking, and hugging, and decided that he would wait until the party broke up naturally. For now, he thought, I'll just enjoy this.

The End

Author's note: The sequel to this story, Harry Potter and the Amulet of the Moon, has already been written and will start going up within a few days (today being August 13, 2009). As was the case with this story, it will be updated every day or two, technical issues permitting. Like this story, the next one doesn't contradict HP canon, except in that the epilogue to Deathly Hallows has been disregarded, and I consider only the books canon, not movies or interviews.

I'd like to let readers know that I now have a blog, [sempriniblog\(dot\)blogspot\(dot\)com](http://sempriniblog(dot)blogspot(dot)com), in which I write about various issues, issues of the type I like to explore in the stories, and the latest entry is about how I came to write these stories. The post also includes links to PDF versions of all five of my stories, including this one. (I will, of course, continue to post here until the end of the story.) Feel free to go to the site and download the stories, and look at the other posts while you're at it.

Many thanks to everyone who reviewed.